



ELEANOR CARTER

*Accidentally*  
BETROTHED  
TO MR. DARCY

# Accidentally betrothed to Mr. Darcy

*A Pride & Prejudice Variation*

Eleanor Carter

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Please note that this work is intended only for adults over the age of 18 and all characters represented as 18 or over.

Kindle Edition

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## About the Book

*Lizzy's chase after Darcy's playful dog ends up in her accidental betrothal to the very man she can't stand but also can't resist.*

When Elizabeth visits Rosings in spring 1812, she doesn't expect to meet that haughty and obnoxious Mr. Darcy again. Nor does she ever expect to be courted by the man who'd ruined her sister's happiness. But beyond any anticipation, she's winning the affections of two wealthy and handsome gentlemen at once.

As Darcy's cousin also reveals his inclination toward Lizzy, she finds herself in a quandary. Undoubtedly, she likes Col Fitzwilliam, but as a friend. Dark and enigmatic Darcy, however, is the man that occupies her thoughts and makes her question everything. *But does she really know him?*

When Darcy rushes to propose, Lizzy is confused. She's hesitating until the chase after Darcy's Great Dane leaves her compromised.

Forced to wed the man she's still doubting, Lizzy faces new predicaments. Darcy proclaims his love, but soon she finds that her husband has been keeping secrets – and a mistress. *Or has he?*

Can Lizzy learn to trust Darcy or will she allow her old foes and his dark mysteries to threaten their fragile union?

**Accidentally Married to Mr Darcy is a sweet and clean romance featuring Our Dear Couple in this Pride & Prejudice Variation, and it's 50K words long.**

# Prologue

Darcy and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, were seated in his house in Town when a most urgent message arrived begging him to make haste to the home of his friend, Mr. Blythe, a gentleman and good friend of his who lived in Town. Rather than excuse himself as he might have done if he'd been entertaining any other guest, he was quick to invite Fitz to come along.

"What seems to be the trouble, Darcy?" Fitz asked him with a worried frown.

"The letter does not explain the urgency, but -- the writing is not his own, and look just there, by his signature. Is that a spot of blood?"

"By Jove, it is," Fitz agreed. "I'm quite sure of it."

The two gentlemen made for Leeds at a breakneck pace, arriving in Kent much sooner than they might have done for any other purpose. The main door flew open even before they'd dismounted, and Blythe's son, Oliver Blythe, came rushing out.

"Sirs, I believe you've made it just in time," said young Oliver, barely fourteen years old. "The situation here is most dire. Both of my sisters have gone off somewhere, and my mother is too upset to help. I was forced to write to you myself, though I did ask my father to sign it, even though he -- well, you'll find out soon enough."

"Lead the way, lad," Darcy said gently and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

Blythe was lying in his bed while a nurse worked frantically to clean up blood-soaked blankets and towels that looked quite fresh. Grimly, she said, "He's not long for this world, sirs. I'm glad you've come so quickly."

"Leave us," Darcy told her. "Take the boy with you."

"Sir, I'd rather stay," Oliver replied. "I'd like to say goodbye, and as I will soon be the man of the house, I ought to begin by doing my duty properly."

“Good lad,” his father managed to reply.

“Blythe, what has happened here?” asked Darcy with a worried frown.

“My dirty little secret comes to stab me in the back -- literally,” he grumbled. “My daughters have run off somewhere and cannot be found. I believe you take my meaning. You’ll see to it that the trouble is properly resolved, Darcy, won’t you? You must promise me that you will. They will trust you, and I trust you, to make sure everything will be taken care of without any of this coming to light.”

Darcy frowned at Fitz, and he nodded. “The secret will remain safe, sir, upon my honor,” he told him. “You have been a good friend to me over the years, Blythe. Thank you for taking me under your wing and showing me the ropes in Town. I shall be eternally grateful for all your help. I hope you will find peace in rejoining your wife.”

“You are a true friend, Darcy,” Blythe told him, then gave a violent cough. “I’ve not much longer now. Please, give me some time with my son. You’ll help with the burial too, I hope? By the old oak with a small marker, I believe that should suffice. I don’t want any involvement from the outside. You must keep everything quiet.”

Darcy wiped a tear from his eye. “Don’t worry, my friend. Everything will be all right.”

# Chapter 1

Upon receiving a letter from her dearest friend Charlotte Collins not many months after her nuptials, Elizabeth Bennet had been most eager to join Sir William Lucas and his daughter, Mariah, on a journey to Hunsford to visit her. She had been missing her dearest friend since she'd gone away and could not wait to see her again.

"Such lovely countryside, Sir William," said Elizabeth with a slight smirk as she gazed out the carriage window. "Will you not join your daughter and I in admiring it?"

Sir William cracked open one eye, though he did not shift positions, and groaned out a reply. "I shall not, Miss Elizabeth. I am completely exhausted, and I shall be most grateful upon reaching the parsonage to simply take to whatever bed my daughter has prepared for me, and there I shall sleep the whole of the evening, and maybe half of the next day besides."

"Oh, Papa, must you be so dull?" complained Mariah. "We are about to pass by Rosings any moment. You will not wish to miss our first opportunity to have a look at the structure."

"My dear daughter, Rosings will still be there to see after I've gotten some sleep," he grumbled as he settled back in his seat.

"Mariah, leave your father be," Elizabeth teased her. "He's enjoying his time away from home in his own way, and we must do the same. I think the famous building in question is just beyond those trees."

"And the parsonage is on the other side of it," Sir William added dreamily. "I cannot wait for a nice, soft mattress!"

The two young women giggled together, but the sound stopped short as they each gasped instead when Rosings finally came into view. The large, imposing structure certainly put Netherfield Park to shame.

"If Rosings is so very grand, can you imagine the prospect of Pemberley?" said Mariah, sighing. "Perhaps someday we can visit that place too."



Elizabeth shrugged. "It's quite unlikely, Mariah. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley went off to London, never again to be seen. How might we accomplish such a thing if not through one of them?"

"I never believed I'd be here either, and yet here we are," she pointed out. "That must mean anything is possible. Mark my words, Lizzy, you shall catch a glimpse of Pemberley before you grow old."

Elizabeth scoffed, but within another few minutes they had reached the main entry gate to Rosings and continued past it, soon arriving at a smaller gate beyond the larger one, which they passed through into a cobblestoned yard. A decently sized home, also crafted of stone, stood before them, and then Charlotte was rushing out the door.

"Oh! Oh! You're finally here!" Charlotte exclaimed, hugging them all. "You must be tired from your journey. I shall have the maid, Parsons, show you straight to your rooms so you may rest for a few hours."

"Do not forget the news, my dear," Mr. Collins chimed in as he, too, stepped into the yard. "Lady Catherine learned that we were to have guests, Cousin Elizabeth, and we have all been invited to dine with her this evening at Rosings."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Charlotte exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Now, don't fret about clothes, Lizzy, just wear whatever you've brought that's best. She won't expect you to possess a gown of any great expense."

"Lady Catherine is forever magnanimous to the truly humble," Mr. Collins added. "She is much more interested in your manners than your dress."

"I am much too exhausted to dine at Rosings tonight," Sir William declined. "Only a full night of rest is likely to improve my constitution. You will, of course, convey my regrets?"

"Of course we shall, Papa," Charlotte agreed as they all headed for the door. "I shall have Parsons settle you into your room first."

"I must confess, Charlotte, I'm not tired at all," Elizabeth admitted. "It's been so long since I've seen you I'd be much too excited to rest at all. You must tell me all your news."

“Very well, I shall,” she agreed, smiling with equal pleasure at the notion as she turned and headed toward a door. “This parlor is my own little sanctuary; no one will disturb us while we are in here. Oh, it’s such a joy to run my own home, Lizzy. There is so much to tell!”

Elizabeth was overjoyed to see that her friend was so happy, for she had been certain that Mr. Collins would never be able to produce such a state in her friend. But of course Charlotte had been adamant that she was not romantic, and her husband was far from romantic himself, so perhaps it had all managed to work itself out.

With just an hour to go before the majority of the occupants of Hunsford Parsonage were to depart and walk over to the manor, Elizabeth finally entered her room. The bed was plump and inviting, but she dared not sleep now lest she miss out on the outing, so she simply discovered her gowns in the closet, picked one out, and did her best to prepare herself to meet a member of the peerage up close. For her, it would be a first. She had rarely been to London in all her years, and even when she did go it was only to stay in Gracechurch street, which was certainly not a place where noblemen and women tended to congregate.

“I’ve heard that Lady Catherine’s nephew has come to visit as well,” said Mr. Collins as they hurried along over a field of grass. “That should be a rare treat. But then, Cousin Elizabeth, you and Mariah have yet to see Rosings at all, so it is a real treat indeed where you are concerned. Rosings is a most amazing place, you see. Such a wide variety of exquisite, expensive rooms. You shall enjoy it very much, I’m quite sure.”

Elizabeth gave little thought to either of the topics her cousin had brought up as they walked, preferring to simply drink in the sights and smells around her. The house was quite grand, and the furnishing lovely, of course, but she was far more interested in getting a look at the Lady herself. She seemed a bit older than her own Mama, and though her face seemed capable of being pleasant there was a slight air of superiority in constant residence.

Now she understood where Mr. Darcy must have gotten the attitude, for in the absence of his mother, surely it was Lady Catherine who must have served as his female role model. It was at about that time that Mr. Collins’ words hit her a bit harder. Nephew? Her nephew was visiting? Did Mr. Collins mean that Mr. Darcy was here,

or did Lady Catherine have more than one?

“Miss Elizabeth?” came an all too familiar voice from the entrance to the parlor they were seated in.

“Mr. Darcy? I did not know you were here,” she said, blushing slightly as she came to her feet and admonishing herself for the suddenly rapid beating of her heart. “I thought you were in London.”

“My aunt invited me,” he explained.

She had forgotten that in addition to being insufferable the gentleman was also devastatingly handsome. Their eyes met and held as he crossed the room, took her hand, and brought her knuckles up to his lips for a brief kiss that left her even more flustered.

“And me, as well,” chimed in another male voice. Another gentleman, an officer if his red coat was any indicator, strode over, taking her other hand before Darcy had even released the first. Though not quite as devastating as Darcy, he was quite handsome as well.

“This is my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Darcy explained. “Youngest son of the Earl of Matlock.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir,” Elizabeth said, giving him a little curtsy.

“None of that, if you please,” the gentleman said, laughing. “While we are out in the country I much prefer to forget the dictates of polite society and simply enjoy myself.”

“Yes, of course, sir,” she agreed, smiling. The sharp contrast between Mr. Darcy’s slight scowl and the exuberance of his cousin were not lost on Elizabeth, and she found that where she could not abide the one, she found the other quite refreshing.

“Dinner is served, Lady Catherine,” the butler, Higgins, announced at the door.

“Excellent,” she replied, standing to lead the party into the dining hall. After managing where everyone should sit in a tone that grated on Elizabeth’s nerves – she knew she had power over them and enjoyed wielding it – she found herself seated beside the Colonel. She

was greatly relieved, as he seemed an amiable character and a balm to her growing dislike of their host.

Across from them, Darcy was seated next to his other cousin, Anne de Bourgh. The young woman was pale, and her dark hair only seemed to emphasize it. She was every bit as dour as Darcy, and the two seemed to have little to say to each other. Darcy's mood seemed fierce, and more than once Elizabeth caught him practically glaring. Perhaps he felt she was not good enough company to be seated beside the son of an earl, Elizabeth thought with a complete lack of charity.

Lady Catherine sent a constant barrage of questions at Elizabeth, making it almost impossible for her to consume her meal. Somewhere in the middle of it, she got onto the topic of prospective marriages, and Elizabeth blushed.

"Lady Catherine, you must know that with such a small dowry each, I and my sisters are not likely to marry well," Elizabeth insisted. "But it is a burden I am not much troubled by myself. I will be content with love and leave fashion and riches to someone else."

"It is understandable, given your station in life, that you should feel thus," she said, smiling. "Understanding one's expectations is extremely important, just as I frequently tell my daughter. Of course, Anne is betrothed to Mr. Darcy, so her own search for a marital partner is already settled, but it is still most wise to comprehend one's place in the world."

Miss Anne and Mr. Darcy cast each other a rather sour look, though neither of them denied Lady Catherine's words. When Elizabeth glanced at Col. Fitzwilliam, she saw him gazing at the pair sympathetically.

"Do you play the pianoforte, Miss Bennet?" Lady Catherine next inquired.

Elizabeth nearly choked on the food in her mouth while trying to swallow it before it was fully chewed. "A little ma'am, and very poorly."

Lady Catherine scoffed. "You must play for us this evening, then, for music is my delight, and if I would have learned, I should have been a great proficient. So would Anne, if her health would have allowed."

“Lady Catherine, I do not speak of my skill with false modesty,” Elizabeth told her. “When I say I play poorly, I am in earnest.”

“Only with practice might a young lady improve,” she insisted. “As I told Mrs. Collins, we have a piano in the servants’ quarters, and you are perfectly welcome to come and practice while you are here. But tonight, it is my pleasure that you shall perform in the little parlor. The piano in that room is not so grand as that in the music hall, but for a quiet evening among friends, it will do.”

# Chapter 2

When Darcy had chosen to accept his Aunt Catherine's invitation to visit during the early spring, he had already been suffering from a heavy heart. A good friend had been recently lost to him, the gentleman had extracted a promise from him while on his deathbed that he would much rather have denied than agreed to, and so far, he had been unable to do anything in order to discharge the duty. The matter in question was far from settled.

Added to that turmoil was the fact that despite his best efforts to avoid it, he had foolishly fallen in love. He came to Rosings with the express purpose of proving to himself that he could cast Miss Elizabeth Bennet out of his blood. He was certain that his growing desire for her was all in his head, and it would disappear immediately once he saw her again.

Yet, that was not what happened.

He'd convinced his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, to come along with him to Rosings, but he had not explained his true motivation in it, and now Fitz seemed to be interested in Elizabeth too. The trouble was, however, that his own affections were not disproven by any measure, but upon seeing Elizabeth talking so freely with his cousin, they had done nothing but come into full flower. Along with a rather strong bout of jealousy, of course.

Hoof, a rascally Great Dane that did whatever she pleased, had taken it upon herself to lay out on the large sofa in the small parlor where the piano was housed, and no amount of coaxing by his aunt's footmen seemed to be working to get her to move.

"Hoof, you great beast, get off of there," Darcy scolded her as he stepped inside. "Some of us humans do not wish to stand up the entire night."

"Excuse me, did you say 'Whoof?'" Elizabeth clarified.

"No, I did not. Her name is Hoof," he replied as he patted the animal. "Because she may bark like a dog, but she is as big as a horse."

She chuckled, covering her mouth with both hands. "It makes sense, I suppose. Though I am surprised to find such a beast hidden within these walls."

"It is not a usual circumstance, I assure you," he commented dryly. "Lady Catherine keeps her dogs kenneled. This one is a rather stubborn visitor to her home."

"Miss Elizabeth? There is the piano, if you will," Lady Catherine told her, indicating a small upright on the other side of the room.

"Yes, my Lady," Elizabeth agreed meekly as she headed toward the instrument.

Without further ado, Darcy stepped over to a large plate of bones set just inside the door, selected the biggest and juiciest of them, and unceremoniously threw it as far out into the hallway as possible. Hoof tore after it, and as soon as she'd cleared the door, he moved the plate out too, closing the dog on one side and the people on the other.

"It's up to the men how to handle her from here," he commented with a wry smile.

Elizabeth had already settled on the piano bench and had begun to idly pick out a tune that was barely recognizable, and now Darcy moved across the room intent on standing by her side.

"How does Georgiana's playing go, Darcy?" asked Lady Catherine, causing him to turn to her long enough to reply.

"She does quite well," he told her. "Better even than I."

"I hope she practices," Lady Catherine added as she settled into one of the chairs, leaving the dog-rumpled sofa for other members of the party. "It is the best way to improve in anything to which you might set your mind."

Darcy turned his attention more fully on Elizabeth, and she fumbled some of the keys before she stopped her faulty attempts completely.

"You seem to be very good with dogs, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said then, smiling. "I wonder that you do not employ such powers of persuasion where humans are concerned. Perhaps if you did, maybe

all of Meryton would not have been so disgusted with your taciturn behavior.”

Darcy blushed, but Fitz, having overheard her words, was soon standing beside them with a curious smile.

“Pray, what was my friend like in Meryton to have earned such a severe set-down?”

Elizabeth scoffed. “It was not a set-down, sir, but only a bit of truth. While in Meryton, your cousin was the most abominable of men. When I met him the first time at the assembly ball, he refused to dance even though gentlemen were scarce, and many ladies were lined up along the walls. And he refused with such condescending manners as to be quite unforgivable.”

Darcy grimaced. “Completely unforgivable?”

Elizabeth considered him for a moment. “Perhaps not completely, I suppose, for you did deign to dance with me on another occasion, did you not?”

“Indeed I did,” he agreed. “How better to make up for my earlier behavior?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, I suppose it is a small sort of penance.”

“Dancing with you is no penance, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Fitzwilliam? I need you,” Lady Catherine called, and Fitz immediately returned to the other side of the room, leaving Darcy and Elizabeth alone.

Uncomfortably, Darcy told her, “I did not know anyone at the assembly ball beyond my own party, Miss Elizabeth, and I am not very good at conversing with people I do not know.”

Her fingers plunked down on a few keys again, but her eyes lifted to look directly into his. “Perhaps you should take your aunt’s advice in the matter and practice,” she suggested.

Darcy nodded, but then he shook his head. His emotions battled in his gut, arguing whether this was sage advice or just her way of scolding him again. In any case, he couldn’t help feeling that she



meant for the words to be useful and not to upset him. She seemed genuinely helpful in her assessment. It was a refreshing change, for he was used to people like Miss Caroline Bingley, whose every word contained a barb just to annoy him.

Elizabeth was like no other woman he'd ever known, and as he observed her in these familiar surroundings, he began to think she was not removed from them completely. She had been able to handle Lady Catherine's rude overtures into her family's upbringing quite well, and though she had not managed to evade playing the piano, she had agreed to do it graciously enough despite the fact she did play rather poorly.

Darcy determined that if his heart was truly set upon Elizabeth, that it would be a wise idea for him to make his offer sooner rather than later. For it was plain to see that Fitz was more than a little interested in courting her himself. He was sure that his best and only course must be to secure her hand before anything between Elizabeth and his cousin could destroy his only chance to be happy.

But the trouble was, he wasn't certain how any happiness in his life could be achieved. Not when there were secrets he was meant to keep thanks to his friend's untimely passing. Could he keep those secrets from Elizabeth if they were to marry? He knew it would not be easy, but he could not stop the beating of his heart, and that heart belonged to her.

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While walking in the garden later that evening, Darcy encountered Hoof. The dog decided to walk along with him, and when he reached a bench, he settled down and gave her a good rubbing down in a manner more similar to what one might give a horse than a canine. It was a silly behavior, but one she had come to expect from him, for she was his own dog, and he'd had her since she was a puppy.

Upon agreeing that Hoof was ready to breed, Darcy had sent her to Rosings a couple of weeks ago with hopes that his aunt's dog, Brute, would sire a litter of pups with her, but so far, there seemed to be no indication of an interest between them.

"I've half a mind to take you back to Pemberley when I go," he told her. "I could always see about bringing Brute to visit there, rather than the other way around."

"There you are, Darcy," Fitz called as he joined the two. "Talking to your dog instead of the humans again, I see."

Darcy scoffed. "I am quite certain Miss Elizabeth was only teasing me. It is a pastime she seems to find great enjoyment in, I find."

"She seemed pleasant enough to me," he replied, shrugging.

"Give it time, my friend," Darcy replied with a slight smirk. "The two of you have only just met. She hasn't discovered your weaknesses yet."

Fitz chuckled. "You make her sound abominable, sir."

Darcy smiled. "Not in the slightest. Headstrong, perhaps. Opinionated, definitely. But never cruel. She is nothing like Caroline Bingley, to be sure."

"High praise, especially coming from you," Fitz commented as he reached over to pat the dog as well. "I look forward to discovering if it was earned."

Darcy schooled his features as much as possible, but he couldn't help the pang of jealousy that overtook him at his cousin's words. Fitz was a friendly, outgoing man who found making friends an easy matter. Darcy definitely needed to act fast if he hoped to be the winner of Elizabeth's heart.

# Chapter 3

Elizabeth sighed and rolled over as sunlight began to stream through her window. It had been such a strange night, for although it was Colonel Fitzwilliam who had been the most amiable gentleman at Rosings, once they'd returned to the parsonage, Mr. Darcy was the only gentleman she could think about.

He seemed different at Rosings than he'd been in Meryton. Not in his overall demeanor, which was always somewhat reserved in polite company, but more than once after he'd come to speak with her at the piano Elizabeth had seen the hint of a smile in his eyes. She wondered if he was contemplating her words and trying to seem more amiable as a result.

Elizabeth never would have thought a gentleman of such consequence, as Mr. Darcy would quite readily describe himself, could ever heed the words of a poor gentleman's daughter, but perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps there was more to the man than she had first supposed. For whatever reason, there seemed to be a slight shift in her heart away from dislike toward – well, tolerance, maybe? Not quite acceptance, of course, for there was much about the gentleman that was quite unacceptable, but she did begin to wonder if her overall judgment of him had been harsh.

She emerged from her chamber in a comfortable morning gown and carrying her sewing basket, intent on eating some breakfast and then hiding away with Charlotte in her parlor for as long as possible. To her knowledge, there was nothing else planned, and with Sir William still intent on sleeping away the morning, she fully expected that Mariah would join them in Charlotte's private parlor as well.

"Ah, Lizzy, there you are," Charlotte called from through the open door to the main parlor instead of the one she'd been aiming for. "It seems we have a morning caller. Certainly, you'll remember Colonel Fitzwilliam from last night's visit."

"Yes, of course," she said, nodding to him as she attempted to convince herself she was not disappointed that he'd come alone rather than bringing along his cousin. "It's a pleasure to see you again so soon, Colonel. I hope you intend to take tea with us, for such a cheerful gentleman is sure to brighten the room."

The colonel stood and captured Elizabeth's hand and brought it up to kiss her knuckles, lingering over them slightly longer than he should. "I do hope you don't mind that I've brought along my cousin, Anne," he said, nodding toward one of the chairs. Anne was so silent and still that Elizabeth had not even noticed her sitting there.

"Oh, no, I am quite pleased to see her," Elizabeth exclaimed. "Somehow, I had the impression that you were seldom let out of the house, Miss Anne."

She giggled shyly. "It is quite so, actually. Fitz has snuck me past my guards for some much-needed time outdoors. Though it is certain my mother will lay in wait for me to take ill as a result."

"Her mother seldom lets her out of the house when it is just the two of them, so of course, Darcy and I do our level best to bring her out with us whenever we are here," Fitz added.

"Miss Anne, you are welcome to visit our home whenever you like," Charlotte offered. "Perhaps your health could be improved with a bit more sunshine."

"I tend to agree with you, Mrs. Collins, yet as I've said, it's quite seldom that Lady Catherine would approve."

"I am only happy to have managed to escape from Rosings at all," Anne added with a shy smile. "Fitz has promised to take me out in his carriage for a ride – and he has brought along one of the maids from Rosings as a chaperon. Still, I am sure such a ride would be more enjoyable with other people along as well."

"I know just the solution," Fitz added with a smile. "You must come along with us, Miss Elizabeth, for surely you would make a lively companion and help to cheer my cousin up."

"But sir, I have come here to spend time with my friend," Elizabeth reminded him.

"Don't be silly, Lizzy," Charlotte scoffed. "I have my father and my sister to keep me company while you are gone. And when you return, you can regale me with what you think of the country here. Though parts of Kent are much the same as Meryton, you may well discover something here you like better."

“Very well, then, I shall come,” Elizabeth agreed, for the prospect of good company, fresh air, and new sights to behold quite drew her in. “Though perhaps I ought to change into a more appropriate attire.”

“Nonsense, Miss Elizabeth,” the colonel cajoled her. “We are deep in the country and have no need to stand on ceremony. We could easily finish our tea and set off directly if you will agree. Perhaps we will do a bit of sightseeing. We are far off from Leeds here, but there are a few manors and even the ruins of an old castle in close enough proximity.”

They drove around for over three hours, and during the trip Anne did not seem the least bit sickly, leaving Elizabeth to wonder just how much of her illness was real and how much of it was done simply to please Lady Catherine. In either case, Elizabeth thought Anne was a very sweet young woman, and she felt quite sorry for her. Not only did she have such a mother, but the husband selected for her simply did not suit such a shy, sweet demeanor.

Darcy was strong-willed and masculine, a lover of a vigorous walk and a man who could be cruel, whereas Anne spoke softly and found little pleasure in walking. Though she strongly suspected a good walk would greatly improve Anne’s ill health, Elizabeth was not the sort of person to meddle, so she did not voice that opinion to her.

Besides, before she could make up her mind to say anything to her, Colonel Fitzwilliam told Elizabeth a story of Mr. Darcy that soon undid all the goodwill she’d begun to muster where he was concerned. Although Elizabeth had been certain that Darcy had convinced his friend, Charles Bingley, to abandon his pursuit of an unsuitable young woman, she had been daring to hope she was wrong in it and that Mr. Darcy would never have done something quite so vile.

Alas, she had been right about it all along.

Though she could not even remember how Mr. Darcy had become the topic of discussion in the first place, at some point during the drive, Colonel Fitzwilliam was suddenly talking of him.

“Darcy will make a most wonderful life companion for whoever he marries,” he commented, glancing sideways at Anne for a moment. “Only a couple of weeks ago, he was telling me how much he prided himself on circumventing what could have been a disastrous alliance

between his friend, Mr. Bingley, and a most unsuitable young woman.”

Trying to seem calm, Elizabeth asked, “Did he give a reason for this interference?”

He shrugged. “I’m not certain. I believe he said his concerns had more to do with her family than with the young lady herself. I did not think there was any need to pry, for my cousin is very reserved and seldom ever tells tales. I was lucky he confided in me at all.”

“I see,” said Elizabeth, frowning. “And you’re certain that he played a large part in convincing his friend to leave? I know that Miss Caroline Bingley would also have been quite convincing.”

“I do not know,” he told her. “But if it was mostly the sister’s doing, that would most surely diminish a great deal of Darcy’s victory.”

“Fitz? I have grown quite fatigued,” Anne told him then and cast Elizabeth a look of understanding. Certainly, she could not know that the colonel was speaking of her sister, could she? Perhaps Caroline Bingley corresponded with Miss Anne de Bourgh. It would only make sense, given that Bingley and Darcy were such good friends if his sister and Darcy’s cousin had met at some point.

Either way, she was grateful to Anne. She could sense that Elizabeth was upset by what her cousin was telling her, and she had used her ‘health’ yet again to get what she wanted, this time to return home so that Darcy’s triumphs would not be discussed further.

Elizabeth determined that she would ask Anne about her feelings, where Darcy was concerned sometime later. Would theirs be a love match or simply a marriage of convenience? She couldn’t say why she was so curious to know, but she couldn’t seem to let the curiosity go.

“I had a wonderful time, Colonel,” she told him as he handed her down outside the parsonage about half an hour later.

“I’m glad to hear it,” he told her. “Perhaps if you are agreeable to it, we shall do this again sometime, Miss Elizabeth. I found the time most enjoyable.”

She nodded. “Yes, as did I. Thank you for bringing me along.”

However much fun she'd had with Colonel Fitzwilliam, it did not negate the fact that she was quite cross with Mr. Darcy. Immediately she went inside and told Charlotte what she'd learned.

"I cannot believe the gentleman could be so insufferable as to brag of his triumph in separating my sister from his friend," Elizabeth practically growled. "And the family was 'unsuitable'? How dare Mr. Darcy deem my family thus? What, precisely, could he have meant? Our father is a gentleman, and not one of his five daughters has ever been in a situation that would make them undesirable as marriage partners. Surely, it is only the small sum invested in our dowries that Darcy must object to, for in all other aspects, I can see nothing unsuitable about us."

"Oh, Lizzy, do not take on so," said Charlotte. "You must comprehend that Colonel Fitzwilliam is a soldier. For him, everything is all about battles and triumphs. You cannot be certain that Mr. Darcy used any of the words you are objecting to, or if they are simply the words that the colonel chose himself."

"It hardly matters," Elizabeth insisted. "In either case, it was most certainly Mr. Darcy who told his cousin the tale, for where else would he ever have learned that Bingley was courting someone, or that Darcy had suggested that she was not good enough? I feel most sorry for Miss Anne, Charlotte. That poor girl is meant to marry a monster."

Charlotte sighed. "There's no talking to you while you're in such a state. Perhaps you ought to go lie down for a while. I will wake you in time for the evening meal."

## Chapter 4

“Fitz? Where the devil have you been all day?” Darcy grumbled when his cousin finally made an appearance in the drawing-room shortly before dinner. “It’s been rather dull around here with both you and Anne having gone off someplace.”

“Forgive me, cousin, but Anne was out with me,” he replied. “You know how difficult it is for her to escape Rosings most days. She begged me to bring her to speak with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and we all ended up taking the carriage out to see some sights together. Both ladies were quite delighted. I rather enjoyed the sparkle in Miss Elizabeth’s eyes.”

Darcy felt as though someone had just dropped a load of bricks on his head.

“Did you?” he asked, his tone mild yet condescending all at once.

Fitz raised one brow, casting Darcy a look of concern. “Do I detect a note of jealousy, cousin? Surely, you cannot have an interest in Miss Elizabeth yourself. I am but a third son, forced by that circumstance into making a living for myself. With that comes the happy ability to choose any wife I wish, whereas you cannot do the same. There is no possibility that your interest in Miss Bennet can be anything but friendly in nature – most particularly since you are betrothed to our cousin. Perhaps I am mistaken. Is it the fact that I took Anne out for so many hours that has your dander up?”

Darcy scoffed. “You know full well that Anne is to me very much like a sister. But did you consider how such an outing might affect her health?”

“Nonsense. She thoroughly enjoyed herself,” Fitz scoffed. “In fact, I would go so far as to insist that her health could be much improved by taking her out more often, particularly if she was made to walk for some portion of time during that outing.”

“Then perhaps tomorrow we ought to make that speculation into a reality,” Darcy suggested. “Surely our aunt cannot object to us taking Anne out for a picnic.”



“May we also invite Miss Elizabeth?”

“I should think if we do, we should ask every other person in the parsonage,” Darcy pointed out. “It would be most abominable to leave young Mariah out of the fun while she is visiting Kent for the first time too.”

Fitz shook his head and chuckled. “How can you be such a caring man but act like a grumpy old mule all at the same time? I have always marveled at the way you pull it off.”

Darcy growled at him but smirked as well. “It’s a particular gift, I suppose.”

Over dinner, an evening in the drawing-room, and well into the time he should have been sleeping, Darcy found himself mulling over his feelings where Miss Elizabeth Bennet was concerned. His cousin had the right of it, on the surface.

Fitz was in a much better social position to make Elizabeth an offer without offending the expectations of society. And yes, Lady Catherine and his mother had created a sort of betrothal between him and Anne, making it even more difficult for him to follow his heart, but all this only made that heart thunder louder than ever.

The simple truth was that he was completely besotted. He loved Elizabeth beyond all reason, and the idea that Fitz might consider courting her left him feeling desperate. He could see only one clear option, and that was to secure Elizabeth as his own fiancée so that the colonel could not begin such a pursuit. He hated the idea of being rivals with Fitz, but there it was.

The following day Darcy and Fitz cornered Anne in the breakfast room and disclosed their plans for the day. Darcy said, “A picnic among friends would do you a world of good, my dear, and I’ll brook no refusal.”

Fitz said, “Besides, we are hoping that Miss Elizabeth Bennet will also consent to be there. And from what I observed of you two, you did seem to like her.”

“Oh, yes, very much,” Anne agreed, smiling. “She is such a kind and caring young woman.”

After breakfasting together, the three cousins were fortunate enough to escape the house before Lady Catherine awakened herself, which generally complicated any plans they might wish concerning the great outdoors. In their possession was a large enough basket of food to feed twenty mouths if the opinion of their aunt and mother would have been consulted, which Darcy felt was all the more reason to hurry out before they could be discovered.

When they arrived at the parsonage, they found all the ladies gathered in the parlor and the two gentlemen out working in the garden. Though the men declined the idea of going off to the lake when Fitz addressed the concept to the women, they were all quite happy to agree.

“I hope it will trouble no one else that I have chosen to bring Hoof along,” Darcy announced when everyone was heading for the carriage. “She is situated in the cargo area, which is why the food is not back there lest we have nothing to eat by the time we arrive.”

“Is Hoof not Lady Catherine’s dog?” asked Elizabeth, confused.

“Indeed not,” Anne scoffed. “That great beastly is at Rosings only long enough to get some puppies started, though such matters are not something we ladies should be discussing. She’ll be back at Pemberley soon enough, I should think.”

“She ought to have been penned up with Brute, the better to facilitate the outcome, I should think,” Fitz pointed out.

“Hadn’t you heard?” Darcy scoffed. “Sometimes, the best way to encourage affection is to spend some time apart.”

Elizabeth smirked. “What a silly notion, sir!”

He raised a teasing brow. “Yes? But true, nonetheless.”

“I disagree, sir,” Fitz told him. “Affections are best grown in company, and later nurtured in shared memories. That is how I would like to spend my future life.”

“And yet you are the soldier, and I the man who remains at home.”

“I may yet someday acquire land of my own, sir,” the colonel told

him. "Ah, here is the perfect place for a picnic, thanks to the shade of the oak tree. Do you not agree, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Indeed, sir, it is most fine, with a good view of the lake beyond," she agreed, smiling at him.

Darcy's stomach clenched fiercely. He knew he needed to find some way to speak to Elizabeth alone, and yet with Mrs. Collins and young Maria, as well as Anne and Fitz along with them, he had no idea how it could be accomplished.

When they were all settled into place on the blankets, he believed fortune was shining down, for Charlotte and her sister were seated on one, and somehow Fitz and Anne had settled together on another, which left the remaining blanket to be shared by himself and Elizabeth, a circumstance which surprised both of them greatly.

Before he could say a word, however, Elizabeth spoke. "My sister, Jane, was in Town for a while, Mr. Darcy. Did you happen to see her?"

"I did not," he said, though it was more that Jane had not seen him. He disliked prevarication, but the last thing he wanted to do was begin an argument with Elizabeth when he was trying to find some way to propose to her.

"I had hoped that your friend might have done, for Jane was quite undone by his sudden departure from Netherfield," she added. "However, since I have it on good authority that your intention in leaving was to separate the two of them, I suppose that design would obviously have included a marked avoidance of Gracechurch Street while she was there."

Darcy's temper rose. "If you're implying that I had a hand in it, then yes, you would be right," he replied.

"But why would you do it, sir?" she protested. "I suppose it was our lack of fortune that made Jane so unsuitable –"

"That wasn't it," he stopped her, glancing over to see that the others had not noticed their discussion. "Bingley was quite besotted, but your sister seemed most indifferent. I was merely concerned that my friend had not truly captured her heart."

“Jane is just shy and modest, sir. She barely shows her heart to me. By what right do you decide whose heart is true and whose is false? Their affections were quite plain to see to everyone else.”

Darcy sighed. “Well, there was also the matter of your mother, who made it quite plain that she hoped the rest of her brood would benefit from wealthy husbands if Jane married Bingley first. Forgive me, I do not blame you or Jane for her opinions, but one cannot unhear such remarks.”

“Sir, I cannot apologize enough for her making them,” Elizabeth replied. “I’ve given up trying after so many repeated attempts at admonishment that I cannot count them all.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I am sorry if my observations were wrong, but in the little time we have before the others will interrupt, it is not your sister’s plight or my friend’s that I’d hoped to talk about,” Darcy admitted then.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I – I am certain it may seem sudden, but I have thought of nothing else since leaving Meryton,” he said. “In vain, I have fought against these feelings. My rank and social standing, my family’s expectations, have all conspired against it, but my heart will not be silenced.”

“Mr. Darcy, I do not understand you.”

“I love you,” he blurted out, and her eyes widened in surprise. “Most ardently. I wish you to do me the honor of becoming my wife.”

Elizabeth gulped. “I? Marry the man who has perhaps forever ruined the happiness of a most beloved sister? And let us not forget what you did to poor Mr. Wickham.”

“Mr. Wickham?” Darcy snarled. “What has he to do with it?”

“He told me how you denied him the inheritance from your father, sir, and gave his living to another man,” she accused.

He gritted his teeth, reining in his anger at her words. “Perhaps, Miss Elizabeth, you should not put such stock in everything you hear, particularly from gentlemen who so actively choose to spin tales to

their own advantage wherever possible. I find I've lost my appetite and will simply walk back to Rosings with my dog."

"Sir, I did not mean –" Elizabeth tried, but he was already on his feet. He stepped over and grasped Hoof's leash, excusing himself from the company and allowing the dog to drag him away.

When he reached Rosings, the butler was quick to approach him.

"Sir? A letter has arrived for you. Shall I retrieve it?" he asked with a slight bow.

"Bring it to my rooms, please. I am fatigued."

When the man brought it, Darcy could see that it had come from the solicitor's office, and he was quick to open it.

*Dear sir, that which you have been looking for has been found. Your presence is immediately required in Town.*

Darcy groaned. He had hoped that he and Elizabeth could talk further once their tempers had cooled, yet the fates had conspired to prevent it. Rather than settle into his bed as he'd planned to do, he wasted no time in heading to the stables.

# Chapter 5

Though everyone at the picnic had been well aware that Elizabeth and Darcy had exchanged heated words, they'd politely refrained from asking Elizabeth what their argument had entailed, and Charlotte only learned the extent of what was said as they sat together in Elizabeth's bedroom later that evening.

"I cannot believe it, Charlotte," she complained. "I do not know if my impressions of the gentleman are completely wrong or if he is wronging Wickham yet another time with the cruelty of his accusations where he is concerned."

"But why would Mr. Darcy wish to accuse Mr. Wickham of lying if he knows you can easily discover the truth?" Charlotte scoffed. "It's far more likely that he's telling you the truth, and Wickham was the one who played you false."

"If only he had not stormed off instead of explaining further, we might have discussed the whole thing, perhaps even cleared up all the confusion," Elizabeth sighed. "And to think that all this time he's been madly in love with me. I confess that revelation is most unsettling. How is it that such gruff manners so thoroughly covered up such a tender sentiment?"

"Perhaps that was by design," Charlotte told her. "Darcy must surely know that a match with you would be frowned upon. Lady Catherine would certainly be beside herself if he married you instead of her daughter."

"That's the thing, though, isn't it?" Elizabeth grumbled. "Darcy and Anne are betrothed. He's already meant to marry someone else. How could he offer for me in the first place? And how should I have answered him if he had given me a chance? The notion of marrying the gentleman had never even crossed my mind at that point. I never expected such a proposal."

"But now, having heard it, have you considered it further?" Charlotte wanted to know.

"I cannot say that I have," Elizabeth admitted. "Surely after the way we argued he'll not revisit the topic. There is little point in

pondering it if there's no chance that he will continue such a pursuit."

"You cannot be sure of that, Lizzy, if his feelings are real," Charlotte told her. "If a man were to give up on his love just because of a silly disagreement then over half the marriages in this world would have never occurred."

Elizabeth shook her head, laughing at such folly. "I don't know. I'm quite tired now, Charlotte. I believe I shall sleep on all of this and see how I feel tomorrow.."

"Yes, that may be best," she agreed. "Perhaps the new day will shed a light on things."

Elizabeth tossed and turned all night, battling with her confused thoughts and trying to make sense of every single interaction she'd ever had with Mr. Darcy. She couldn't determine if he was truly the monster she'd supposed or if she had done him a great wrong.

Later that morning, Colonel Fitzwilliam stopped by around tea time, and this time he was alone. "Forgive me, ladies, but I'll not be able to provide any entertainment for you today. Lady Catherine is expecting me back shortly to go shopping with her in Leeds, but I thought that you'd be interested to know that Mr. Darcy has been called away to London by the arrival of a most mysterious letter. I do not wish to bear tales, of course, but I did catch a glimpse of the missive. It only said the thing he had been searching for was found, and he must come immediately to help sort it out."

Elizabeth blinked. "A mysterious letter?"

Fitz smiled. "Yes, indeed. He has been getting them quite frequently over the past few months, I find. But usually, he never leaves for more than a couple of days at a time. I'm certain it's just something to do with one of his business ventures or another since he does have several."

With a snort, Elizabeth commented, "I'm sure that I'll not miss his company while he's gone. Mr. Darcy can be quite frustrating at times.

"Oh no, Miss Elizabeth, never say so," he protested. "Mr. Darcy is the best of men. A most honorable and worthy gentleman who truly means well. He would never willingly harm a soul, and that's certain. I love him like a brother."

“High praise, indeed, sir,” she said, smiling. “I wonder if you might tell me your opinion of my friend, Mr. Wickham. Surely since he grew up at Pemberley, you must know something of him. He and Mr. Darcy do not seem to like each other much, and I cannot fathom why.”

He leaned forward, dropping his voice to a more conspiratorial level. “Forgive me for saying so, Miss Elizabeth, but it is well that Darcy should not like him after all the behaviors we have witnessed concerning that gentleman. I must warn you that George Wickham is not to be trusted. Quite the gambler and rake, I’m afraid, and never one to honor his debts once made. I do not like to speak ill of anyone, but in his case – you’d do well to avoid the gentleman completely.”

“Truly?” she gasped. “But he has been nothing but pleasant to me.”

“That is how he manages to get away with it,” said the colonel, nodding sagely. “Yet, as I said earlier, Lady Catherine is soon expecting me back at Rosings. But, before I go, Miss Elizabeth, I’ve brought you a treasure to keep you occupied while I’m away.”

“You have?” Elizabeth gasped, watching as he tugged something from the pocket of his coat.

“Just a little book of poetry to help cheer you up since yesterday you seemed so troubled,” he told her, setting it into her hands. “I must insist upon you keeping it. Perhaps when I see you next, we could discuss some of the quotes.”

Elizabeth blushed. “Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you. Enjoy your time in Leeds, sir.”

She stood as he turned to go, and he turned back to raise a brow at her, though his eyes twinkled. “As much as I am able.”

Charlotte and Elizabeth exchanged a knowing smirk just as Mariah came bolting through the door.

“Oh, excuse me, Colonel, I did not think you would be standing there,” she said. “Are you leaving now?”

“I am, Miss Mariah,” he said, nodding. “I’m sure the ladies will



tell the tale.”

“Good morning to you, then, sir,” she said, turning toward one of the chairs.

When he was gone, Elizabeth stared at the little black book in her hand, and she couldn’t even decide upon how to feel about it. A young woman usually received such gifts only from a gentleman whose interest in her might well be romantic in nature, and she wasn’t certain what to think of that.

Charlotte, too, was well aware of it as she began to pace instead of returning to her seat.

“Goodness, Lizzy, when it rains it pours with you, I find.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, I really think you’re right. But Charlotte, what am I to do? If what Colonel Fitzwilliam has said about Mr. Wickham is true, then all my dislike of Mr. Darcy was based on lies. How can I determine which things I believed of him were true and which were false when my entire expectation was skewed with such a bias from the very beginning?”

Charlotte scoffed. “Not the very beginning, Lizzy. Don’t forget when he would not dance with you.”

“He was nervous, and I was a stranger,” Elizabeth insisted. “He said as much himself.”

“Lizzy, you’re the only one who can decide how you feel,” Charlotte told her. “But if the colonel has given that book to you, it’s certain he may soon offer for you too. If he does so, how do you think you will answer?”

The knot in her gut worsened to the point she almost felt ill. “I – I do not know. Colonel Fitzwilliam is most amiable, I find, but –”

“But it was not Colonel Fitzwilliam or his possible interest in you that kept you awake all night,” Charlotte finished for her.

Elizabeth groaned. “It was not. In truth, Charlotte, all I can think of is Mr. Darcy, even when I try to stop myself. It has been like that since the first night if I am being honest in it. I thought at the time that I was only thinking of him because he had wounded my pride,

but there was much more to it than that. Now that I realize his own feelings toward me, I can freely admit that anger toward the man has not been my only motivation. But now I have made quite a mess of matters between Mr. Darcy and myself, have I not? And besides, I do not even like him. Do I?"

"Sometimes like and desire have very little to do with each other," Charlotte advised. "Sometimes, you can both like and hate a person at the same time but still find it impossible to be apart from them. It doesn't have to make sense, Lizzy, it just – is."

"Lizzy? Has Colonel Fitzwilliam made you an offer?" Mariah asked, confused.

She smiled. "He has not, dearest. I'm certain he was only trying to be kind when he brought me this book. Perhaps he simply wished to make amends over the actions of his cousin."

"But it's so romantic to be courted by a handsome stranger," she said with stars in her eyes. "I cannot wait until I'm a few years older and handsome gentlemen begin to flock around me. It must be wonderful to be so desired that two cousins would both want you for their wife."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Do not forget, Mariah, that we have already become acquainted with their aunt. For all that either gentleman might be a prize, Lady Catherine might make such a match far more trouble than it would be worth."

"And besides, Darcy's already betrothed, isn't he?" she remembered. "What a bother, that! But I've had it from Anne that she has no intention of marrying him anyway. She told me that she and Darcy had agreed upon it years ago but simply allow her mother to continue to hope."

"Mariah, I'm certain that Miss Anne must have told you such confidences with secrecy in mind," Elizabeth admonished her. "Surely such concepts have not been made a common knowledge, and you ought to keep them to yourself."

"I daresay Mr. Darcy's attachment to Anne cannot be too well-formed if he was asking Lizzy to be his wife," Charlotte pointed out. "Though, of course, you know that nothing of this conversation must leave this room, Mariah. Your word on it."

She scoffed. “Charlotte, I am not a little girl anymore. Elizabeth’s secrets are certainly safe with me.”

# Chapter 6

The poor timing of the letter Darcy had received upon his return to Rosings weighed heavily on him when he stopped in to see Bingley the following evening after attending to the urgent business that had brought him to London. He and the solicitor had agreed upon what was to be done, and he had given the man full license to sort out the details.

Elizabeth's words also laid heavily on his mind as he mulled them over. He had determined that a sister would know better than anyone else the true feelings of her sibling, and upon further reflection, Darcy realized he'd been quite wrong about Jane. Her feelings for Bingley may not have been blatantly shown, but they were obvious if one knew what they were looking for.

"Darcy? When did you get back to Town?" asked Bingley, surprised to see him as the butler let him in.

"Only just, though I won't be staying long," he explained. "You know that I went to Rosings for a most particular reason."

His smile fell slightly, for when Darcy had left, he'd told Bingley that he intended to go there and see Miss Elizabeth Bennet for the express purpose of getting her out of his system. Of course, it had had the completely opposite effect on him, but now that his feelings were out in the open and Elizabeth had rebuked him rather than accepting his offer, he was more torn up inside than ever.

"So, how is that working for you?"

"Not at all, I'm afraid," Darcy answered, his tone dejected. "Of all the ridiculous, muddleheaded actions. Not only did I fail to forget about her, Bingley, I did the complete opposite and offered for her instead."

Anger sparked in his friend's face as he glared. "You offered for Elizabeth Bennet, Darcy, after everything you said against Jane?"

"That's just the thing, Bingley, I now understand that I was completely wrong about Jane Bennet," Darcy admitted, but he was too troubled by his own experiences with Elizabeth to apologize to him

properly at the moment. “You see, when I offered for Elizabeth, I considered a lot of different answers she might give me, but ‘no’ wasn’t one of them. I believed – quite stupidly – that my wealth and status would be enough inducement for her to reply in the positive, and yet the reason she did not accept my offer was Jane. She was angry that I’d convinced you that Jane does not love you and only wanted you for your money.”

“The same reason you thought that she, herself, would never refuse you,” Bingley pointed out. “Honestly, Darcy, I fear you know very little in matters of the heart.”

“Yes, quite,” he agreed. “Only now I’ve made a complete muddle of everything. I wish I could blame it on my upbringing, on the expectations of my friends and my family, but it’s all my own fault. My own pride has taught me to lock away my heart and to believe the worst in people who do not deserve my censure.”

Bingley sighed and shook his head. “What are you going to do about it?”

“There’s little I can do but make one more appeal and hope she will listen,” Darcy replied, though he was feeling more dejected than ever. “The trouble is, Fitz seems to have taken a liking to Miss Elizabeth as well. I don’t know what I’ll do if he offers for her, and he marries the girl I’ve given my heart.”

“You really have made your bed this time, Darcy,” Bingley agreed. “And what am I to do about Jane? I’ve been the worst kind of a fool, walking away from everything we could have shared. I have never stopped loving her, but I’m certain she must have forgotten me by now.”

“Not if her sister is to be believed. She insists that Jane is pining for you still.”

“I cannot know that for certain,” said Bingley, sighing.

“Perhaps if I can convince Elizabeth to accept my proposal, it will pave the way for you and Jane,” Darcy suggested then. “You are certain to be at my wedding, and Jane would be as well.”

“Then I wish you good luck in it, sir,” Bingley said, casting Darcy an encouraging smile. “Go back to Rosings and see that you do.”

“Yes, I shall, just as soon as the business, I came into London to transact has been successfully concluded. A nasty business, to be sure, and something I cannot explain even to you, my friend. If I could have avoided it entirely, I would have, but as it is now, I believe I am far more involved than I would have hoped. You ought to wish me luck in it as well.”

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Since Darcy's business in London was completed, at least for the time being, he departed from London the following morning and entered Rosings sometime later that day. He found Lady Catherine and Colonel Fitzwilliam in the blue parlor, where the pair seemed to be sharing a few heated words.

“I do not understand you, Fitzwilliam, that you would choose to lavish your attentions on a girl like Miss Elizabeth Bennet, whose station is so far beneath your own,” Lady Catherine was saying, her tone somewhat perturbed. “Why do you find excuses to go to the parsonage to visit every single day? You are only going to make her think you're interested in her, and that would be most cruel.”

“Madam, I love you quite dearly and value your opinions, but I can assure you that my behavior towards Miss Elizabeth has been in no way improper,” Fitz protested. “And if I do show an interest in her, why should it be thought wrong? I am a third son who must work for his living, and that opens up many possibilities for who I might choose for a wife. Miss Elizabeth is the daughter of a landed gentleman, and her exemplary manners prove that she's had a proper upbringing as well. Any man who marries her will surely make a most happy arrangement.”

“Darcy? Thank goodness you have returned,” said Lady Catherine when she saw him. “Your cousin won't listen to a word I'm saying. Is there nothing you could say to him that might help? I am at my wits' end trying to make him see reason.”

“Fitz, I have always advised you in the past that you ought to

seek a woman who owns lands in her own right, and Miss Elizabeth Bennet is not such a one,” Darcy reminded him, but then immediately thought of what happened when he recently advised Bingley and felt compelled to add something more. “However, I must add that it’s my fondest hope that if you do, that such a woman will also manage to win your heart.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, boy, you are no help at all,” Lady Catherine complained. “All this nonsense about marrying for love? I thought that you were above it, Darcy, and saw how insensible the concept is. Surely you’re not such a sentimental fool yourself. I was hoping that you would talk some sense into Fitzwilliam, not counsel him to do something foolish.”

Darcy defended himself. “Did I not say that he should place his heart in the hands of a woman with lands? What more sage advice can I give than that?”

She scoffed. “None better, and yet you have not taken your own advice to heart. If you truly believed what you were saying, you and Anne would have been married for years by now.”

He cringed. “I did not know this conversation was about me, Aunt. And you know the answer to that question already. Neither Anne nor I had agreed to honor the bargain made between our mothers when she was born. She is like a sister to me, and to her, I am her brother.”

“Darcy is right. This discussion hardly involves him or Anne,” Fitzwilliam added. “We were discussing the merits of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Fitzwilliam, please,” she insisted. “Miss Bennet might be a good catch for some gentleman or other, as long as that gentleman is not you. Third son or not, your father is still a peer of the realm. Society will expect something more of you than – well, than a young woman with such a meager dowry.”

“Her dowry is of no consequence to me,” Fitzwilliam insisted. “And, as I have not yet voiced an intention toward the lady in question, I cannot think why you are scolding me to begin with.”

“I have eyes, my boy, and can certainly see,” she replied. “You are quite besotted with the girl, but it is a mistake. I dislike speaking

so plainly, but such is the case.”

“I believe I am more tired from my journey than I had thought,” said Darcy. “I shall go up to my rooms for now and join you for the meal this evening.”

“Quite right,” Fitz agreed. “I believe I, too, could use some room to breathe.”



# Chapter 7

Darcy had only been gone a couple of days, and Colonel Fitzwilliam came to the parsonage on both of them. Each time he stopped by Elizabeth had brought out the little book and they read a couple of the verses. She felt almost like a fraud, though, because there she was spending time with a kind and handsome gentleman, yet all she could do was think about his cousin.

She tried to tell herself that the colonel was only being friendly, that he was not interested in courting her, but in the back of her mind, she knew better. She knew the truth – the courtship, at least in his mind, had already begun. Yet, she could do nothing to stop it, could she? Darcy may have professed an ardent love before their quarrel, but then he had stormed off without even staying to finish discussing the matter.

Would she have accepted Darcy after they'd cleared up their misunderstandings? Probably not immediately, though she would certainly have asked that he give her time to learn more about him before she gave him such an important decision. Surely he would not wish to enter into a marriage before he comprehended what sort of life they might have together.

And then there was still the fact that he and Anne were betrothed. Mariah may have been told by Miss Anne that she and Darcy held no interest in one another, but that did not make a betrothal any less compelling in the eyes of others who knew of it. Elizabeth would never wish to be the cause of Miss Anne's unhappiness, and she wished that she might ask her plainly how she felt in the matter.

Yet obviously, she could not simply ask her outright if she loved Darcy as one might love a husband while it was Colonel Fitzwilliam who was paying her court. The only way she might explain such a question would be to tell Anne everything, and though she liked the young woman, she did not know her nearly well enough to entrust her with such unusual confidences.

But the most unusual thing about that was, no matter which gentleman was successful in courting Elizabeth, Anne would still become her cousin. Perhaps if she asked her generic questions about each of the two men the two of them could draw just a little closer,

and Elizabeth could also determine which of the two she ought to concentrate on. It would seem obvious that she should concentrate on the colonel, given that Mr. Darcy had run off to London. But somehow her heart would not allow it, which ought to have been an answer in and of itself.

There was something more between her and Darcy than she cared to acknowledge, and she would do well to try to understand it before she committed herself somewhere else. Thankfully, on that second afternoon, Colonel Fitzwilliam had managed to bring Miss Anne along with him another time, and Mr. Collins conveniently invited the colonel outside to view his garden at some point.

Elizabeth managed to guide the conversation rather easily to Anne's opinion of her betrothal and also to her opinion of Colonel Fitzwilliam. "What is your feeling of marrying Mr. Darcy, Miss Anne? It does seem if you'd had the intention that it ought to have been accomplished well before now."

She smiled. "Darcy is dear to me, Miss Elizabeth, but not in such a manner. He is too much like a brother to ever consider him for a husband. In truth, of the two young men, I would have preferred a betrothal to the colonel. Though I suppose his interests lie elsewhere, and I am stuck pretending an intention to marry a gentleman I never will."

"It's all such a muddle," Elizabeth said, sighing. "I do not envy you such a difficult life."

On the third day since she and Darcy had argued, however, it was even worse because she learned that morning that Mr. Darcy had not lingered long in London but had returned to Rosings the previous afternoon. "Anne has asked me to extend a visit to the ladies this afternoon to come and visit her in the west garden," Fitz added as he prepared to return to Rosings. "I'll not be joining you, of course, since Lady Catherine has been finding a remarkable number of tasks for me to do, but I do hope you all enjoy yourselves."

Anne had not yet arrived in the garden when Elizabeth, Charlotte, and Mariah stepped in through the little gate and settled on a couple of the marble benches. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the flowers were starting to bloom.

“This place is quite lovely,” said Charlotte with a delighted sigh. “I’ll wager we’d find nothing so wonderful in Meryton, not even at Netherfield.”

“Miss Caroline Bingley did not seem interested in remaining there long enough to upgrade any of the greenery,” Elizabeth agreed. “I wonder that Bingley should not give the place up entirely if he does not intend to spend time there. Meryton needs someone in it’s greatest house who will give it the love it deserves, and his sister is not such a person.”

“Do you think Bingley actually would court Miss Darcy?” asked Mariah, giggling slightly. “I have never seen the girl, of course, but I have heard that she is quite lovely.”

“Where did you hear about that?” asked Elizabeth in surprise.

“Your Mama, of course, when she came to visit mine,” she replied. “She was worried that he would forget all about Jane and marry Miss Darcy. Do you think that he will?”

“The match is quite reasonable, I suppose,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Yet, I cannot help but be against it when I know that he and Jane were so perfect together. I know now that Darcy simply made a mistake in the matter, warning his friend that Jane was not in love when in fact, she was, but it is a sad business and one with no simple solution. Who knows what might happen in the future?”

As they continued to talk, they looked up and saw that a maid had stepped outside and was headed their way. “Forgive me, ladies, but Miss Anne has taken ill and has asked me to convey her regrets that she cannot join you here.”

“Goodness me,” Charlotte gasped. “Is she all right? I should go and see how she is doing.”

“Yes, yes, let us hurry,” Mariah agreed.

Elizabeth hesitated. “Too many visitors in such a state would not be comforting. I should wait here, and you two can return to tell me how she is doing.”

“That’s good thinking, Lizzy,” Charlotte agreed. “We won’t trouble her overly long, but I do want to see if there’s anything I can

do to help her. As the parson's wife, I feel that it's my duty to assure her comfort before we return home."

"You're sure you'll be okay here alone?" Mariah asked.

"Yes, I shall," Elizabeth told her. "I have the book I received from the colonel here in my pocket. I'll simply read a poem or two while you are gone."

Elizabeth watched as her friends followed the maid inside, her fingers idly reaching for the little tome in her skirt pocket. With a sigh, she resigned herself to the fact that her mind immediately returned to thoughts of Mr. Darcy instead of the gentleman who had given it to her.

She was quite certain that now that their tempers had died down, the two of them definitely needed to talk. Her gut filled with butterflies at the very idea of encountering him. Was she to a point where she would accept his proposal? Of course not. But it would be pointless to deny that she missed him and held a great anticipation to see him another time.

"I should find him myself," she grumbled. "I should attempt to apologize."

Although it was the gentleman she wished to look for, it was not Mr. Darcy who suddenly started to bark excitedly and jumped over the fence into the garden, but rather his behemoth of a dog, Hoof. Elizabeth couldn't fathom exactly how it had happened, but somewhere in the middle of all the trouble she'd been having with the master, the dog had taken a liking to her.

Now, having found her, Hoof was quite determined to offer affection...or so Elizabeth thought at first until she began to tug playfully at her skirts. "Oh ho, so you have come looking for another game of fetch, have you?" she asked, chuckling. "Well, I'm sure that it would not be too difficult to find a stick somewhere around here."

"You seem to be quite good with dogs, Miss Elizabeth," came a deep, mellow voice as the master caught up. Darcy opened the gate and stepped into the garden with her.

Elizabeth smiled wryly. "Have you been there long, Mr. Darcy."

He blushed. "Long enough to know you were thinking of me. Well, unless you've had an argument with Fitz since we had ours."

"Argument, sir?" she scoffed. "Not hardly. Though I did want to say – to admit that I've been painting you to be the villain, when in fact you were only trying to help. I understand why you separated Jane and Bingley now. You were wrong, but – well, your heart was not."

"And Wickham?" he asked, their eyes locked onto each other.

Elizabeth's heart was pounding faster as she nodded. "I guess I was wrong about him too."

Darcy stepped closer. She could see his hands moving toward her as if to embrace her. Her heart went up into her throat; She'd wanted to talk, but this was about to turn to something else, and she knew she needed to stop him.

"Darcy, don't –" she began.

With a loud bark, Hoof surged forward and chomped down on the book in Elizabeth's hand. She was startled as the dog tugged it free and began to run toward the open gate with it.

"Hey! Hoof, give that back to me!" Elizabeth exclaimed.

"Hoof!" Darcy yelled, and when she tore after the dog he yelled another time, "Elizabeth? Wait, I can get it. Wait!"

But she didn't stop. She was embarrassed and not quite ready to turn back and face the man who had just been so close to taking her into his arms. An apology was one thing, but that didn't mean that she was going to agree to marry Mr. Darcy. Three days ago, she'd found the man reprehensible, and now? She wasn't quite sure what to feel. She didn't know how much of the dislike was real and how much of it was wrong.

Darcy was still the same gentleman who refused to dance with her on the night they first met. He was still the same man who had convinced his friend to return to London rather than pursue a relationship with her sister. And he was Lady Catherine's nephew, and he was still betrothed to someone else whether he intended to marry her or not. It was too soon. She couldn't simply let it all go just

because he wanted her to. That wasn't how it worked.

Hoof tore across the field to a building in the distance, scratching at the open door. The distinctive smell of beer brewing wafted out and assailed Elizabeth's nostrils. The dog had gone into the brewery, and she intended to follow.

"Elizabeth, stop. It's not safe in there," Darcy called after her. "Be careful. The brew might have gotten on the floor. You could slip and fall!"

She heard him, and she understood, but she was in no mood for caution. She simply wanted to retrieve the book, make her excuses, and return to the parsonage where she could take a deep breath and think.

She didn't want the book because Colonel Fitzwilliam had given it to her, but because for a few days, at least, reading it had helped to keep her calm. And now, with Darcy back and clearly as in love with her as ever, she was going to need to be comforted even more.

# Chapter 8

Darcy was disgusted with himself, truth be told. He'd left London expressly to come back to Rosings, to finish the discussion he and Elizabeth had started. And yet, despite every opportunity during the day to seek Elizabeth out, he'd found himself frozen when he'd realized she was sitting alone in the garden. She was clearly holding a book but not reading it. Her face had been a mask of worry and speculation, but he had no idea who she'd been thinking of; his cousin or himself?

Although she ought to have been in the kennels Hoof was again out walking, and she'd joined Darcy as soon as they encountered each other. The dog did not seem to have any qualms about approaching Miss Elizabeth when they saw her. With a joyful bark of recognition, she ran into the garden, and the two shared a happy reunion. Darcy found himself hopeful that their own reunion would go so well.

It was only when she'd spoken of an apology that Darcy had found the courage to move, and then the whole conversation suddenly didn't matter when Hoof had stolen her book. Elizabeth heard his words of caution quite well enough, and yet she went into the brewery anyway. The floors were indeed damp, but Elizabeth threw caution to the winds and hurried through the building.

At the back of the brewery was a large room used to store the finished kegs as they began to cool, but at the moment, the room was not even half-filled. Sure enough, just as Elizabeth stepped in after Hoof, she slipped and fell, crying out. Unthinking, Darcy rushed in after her. While he was helping Elizabeth to sit up, Hoof dropped the book, barked twice, and tore back out through the door.

Darcy groaned as he watched it slam shut behind the dog, locking the two of them inside.

"Blast!" he exclaimed, shaking his head in despair as he blindly fumbled to find a handle in the dark.

"What's wrong?" asked Elizabeth in a voice filled with pain and worry. Certain that her face must be covered in tears, Darcy rushed back to her side, tugging a kerchief from his pocket as he went.

“Forgive my inattention, Miss Elizabeth, but the door – well, I can find no way to open it from the inside. I had hoped to stop it from fully closing when I rushed over, but alas I was not fast enough.”

In the utter blackness, it was impossible to see it, but Darcy could feel the look on her face as she asked, “You mean we’re trapped in here, sir? What are we going to do?”

He reached for her hand to give it a little squeeze. “We’re going to talk, of course. It’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? To apologize?”

“Well, yes, I wished to tell you that I misjudged you greatly, but I hardly think I was hoping to be trapped with you in a dark room when I uttered the sentiment,” she replied, and he could hear the panic growing in her tone.

“Do you dislike small spaces, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked with a worried frown.

“Only when I cannot get out of them, Mr. Darcy.”

“How is your ankle, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked, trying to distract her. “Did you injure it when you fell?”

“I – I believe so,” she told him. “Certainly, I cannot move it without awakening a great deal of pain. That cannot be good.”

“You’re quite right, I fear,” he agreed. “May I attempt to examine it?”

“In the dark, sir?”

He gave an ironic laugh. “I’ll have to feel the bones and guess at any damage, rather than relying on my eyes, of course. Forgive me in advance, won’t you?”

Darcy reached out in the darkness and encountered Elizabeth’s thigh. He gently followed it downward until he discovered the ankle, which he started to assess for her. Elizabeth cried out in pain and jerked away for a moment before forcing herself to return the appendage to his care.

“A sprain, at the very least,” he said, sighing. “We’ll have no way of knowing the extent of the trouble until we can get you a surgeon to



assess it. Would that we had some way to bind it so you could be more comfortable while we wait for help.”

“And how long will we have to wait?” she asked, the worried tone even more pronounced.

“Whoever was working in here will not be gone all night since the fires were still burning under the pots, and this room has not been filled,” Darcy reassured her. “They will need to return to check on the fires and eventually move the vats so they can cool. I do not believe it will take above an hour before we are rescued.”

“Sir, I – um, well, that’s not exactly good news, is it? I had not hoped to bring matters between us to such a sudden close. We might well have managed to become amiable and get to know each other before discussing a marriage before this, but now?” It was Elizabeth’s turn to laugh ironically. “Now, we’ll have to take some of Charlotte’s advice and become better acquainted after we have spoken our vows.”

Darcy let go of Elizabeth’s ankle and reached for her hand again. “You already had my offer, Elizabeth. You must know that my feelings have not changed. If anything, learning that you will tell me what you are feeling without fear of reprisal has only strengthened my desire.”

“Sir, I did not doubt it,” she admitted. “However, all this time I’ve been painting you as a most foul villain when you were not deserving of it. I need – well, I had hoped for time to sort out which of my misgivings were false and which of them are real.”

“I hope you might have at least a few feelings toward me that are good,” he told her, smiling. “Have we not always enjoyed discussing books or even played a good game of cards during the times we spent together at Netherfield and Longbourn?”

“We did,” she agreed, laughing shyly. “Yet in all that time, I was angry with you. At the ball where we met, sir, you said I was tolerable but not tempting, and I fear I have never managed to forgive the slight.”

He laughed. “Of course, I was lying about it at the time, my dear. Would you expect me to admit, on that very first night of meeting, that my heart was pounding loudly enough that I feared no music could ever drown it out? What I said, I said only to mask an attraction I could not allow myself to feel.”

Elizabeth giggled. "You must be teasing me, sir. How could cold and aloof Mr. Darcy of Derbyshire and Pemberley ever be afflicted thus?"

"I am not cold and aloof," Darcy protested. "I told you already, I become quite nervous when I meet new people. I have always preferred to stay in the country whenever possible for just that reason."

"You are much like my father in that regard, though it is not because he dislikes new people in general but rather feels that there is nothing in London to tempt him other than the book store."

Darcy laughed another time. "Well, I am tempted by a five-story book store myself. Who could blame him?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I have never seen it myself, of course, but I believe it would be quite exciting."

"When we go to London next, it shall be the first place I take you," he offered and felt her give a little tremble through the hand he still held, which she soon withdrew.

"I suppose the next time I go into London, it shall be with you," she speculated. "I had not given the matter any thought, but thanks to this adventure very soon, I shall be a married woman. I'll be the Mistress of Pemberley, with all the duties that entails. And I shall be meeting your sister – a sister who shall be my sister as well. It is quite difficult, sir, to wrap my head around it all."

Darcy sighed then. "You know that I'm sorry about this, right? I never would have wished to compromise you to get the wedding I asked you for. It was my deepest desire that you would come to me because you wanted to, and not because of any other consideration. You must know that."

"It is not your fault, sir," she replied. "And I admit, I had already begun to realize that my own attraction to you was – well, I will not lie, it was growing by leaps and bounds once I realized how wrong I'd been in the matter. I cannot say that I've grown to love you, of course, but I do wish that we shall at least manage an amiable rapport."

"I am pleased at such a start, Miss Elizabeth," he told her.

“Mr. Darcy, unless you specifically told Hoof to steal my book and trick us into entering this room, I hardly think this is your fault. Even I cannot paint you into being that much of a villain.”

“I would far rather have gained your consent before, and knew your heart was in it, than to earn your favor this way,” he grumbled.

A loud barking just beyond the door startled the pair of them from their talk, and in another few moments, the door swung open. A startled brewery worker stared at them, mouth gaping before he rushed over to assist Darcy in standing Elizabeth up.

“Sir, I cannot put even a little weight on it,” Elizabeth said in a defeated tone.

Darcy smiled. “My dear Miss Elizabeth, as the damage is already irreparable, we might as well ensure your comfort. Propriety be damned, I say!”

Without another word, Darcy lifted Elizabeth into his arms and carried her all the way back to the parish. Mr. Collins stared as the maid opened the door, and they stepped through into the main parlor.

“Goodness, Mr. Darcy, is my cousin in need of a doctor?”

“She is, indeed,” said Darcy. “You must send for a surgeon at once. The best one available, if you please. I shall assist in it, since Elizabeth will soon become my wife.”

“Lizzy?” Charlotte exclaimed as Darcy laid her on one of the sofas. “You have accepted Mr. Darcy? How very exciting!”

“As exciting as it may be, my friend, right now, I could use a large dose of laudanum if you please. Before I can give the matter any further thought.”

# Chapter 9

Elizabeth wasn't sure how much of it came from the laudanum, and how much came from shock over the suddenness of the situation, but she was feeling somewhat numb as she waited for the surgeon to arrive. Though she had resolved to become Darcy's friend and see if their feelings might grow into something more, she had never expected to be compromised into something she was completely unprepared for.

It felt strange to lie in a room filled with people who now viewed her and Mr. Darcy as a couple. Especially since she had not yet received a confirmation from her father that such was true – though it was certain that the man would not refuse, he was just as cognizant of what it could mean to have a compromised daughter as any other gentleman and would not shirk the duty. Still, it would be something of a comfort to hear that approval from his own mouth.

These thoughts were apparently foremost in the mind of her cousin as well as herself, for during her stay in Hunsford, it fell to Mr. Collins to protect Elizabeth, and he did not wish to seem remiss in his duty. “If you must rectify such a situation, you shall have my complete backing in it, sir, for I would never wish to see any harm befall any of my fair cousins. Perhaps it would be best if we went to pen a letter to Mr. Bennet straightaway, inviting him to have a hand in the matter.”

“Yes, indeed, a most advisable plan,” Darcy agreed. “And, I am certain, Miss Elizabeth will appreciate a little quiet while we summon a surgeon to help her.”

Elizabeth was quite grateful when Mr. Collins guided Mr. Darcy from the room. When they were gone, however, the last thing on her mind was to immediately shut her eyes. Charlotte and Mariah were quite insistent on learning the whole story, which Elizabeth was quick to tell them while she could do so without the gentlemen in the room.

“I cannot believe this has happened,” she admitted groggily as the medicine attempted to pull her into slumber. “Of course, I must accept his proposal now that we have spent time alone together. I'm compromised, whether anything happened between us or not. If I did not accept him, it would be completely unforgiveable of me. My

sisters would be ruined by association, and even Mr. Darcy's reputation would suffer greatly as a result."

"But Lizzy, have you resolved those issues which you so recently argued over?" Charlotte asked her with a worried frown. "I know that you were quite angry with him after the last time you spoke but also had a great desire to settle the matters as well."

"To the best of our ability, for now, we have set aside such concerns, I suppose. Though, in truth, Jane's happiness is every bit as ruined as it was before," Elizabeth conceded. "Yet if I am to marry Mr. Darcy, it's certain his best friend would come to visit us at some point, and surely Jane will visit me as well. Would they not be sure to meet again and remember everything that once they'd felt? I am convinced that all that must happen to bring them together again is such a meeting between them."

"Yes, they certainly must meet again," Charlotte agreed. "For I never saw two people who were more in love."

"Then let us hope," Mariah added, "That they have this meeting before Bingley proposes to Miss Darcy."

Charlotte groaned at this pronouncement. "Sister, you are not helping at all. Why don't you go sit outside and wait and tell us when the doctor has arrived?"

"Must I?" she complained.

Charlotte nodded. "Yes, I do believe so. And as for myself, I too shall leave you to rest for a while, Lizzy. You're in enough pain, it'll be a perfect excuse to have a good cry. And that, I believe, shall do wonders towards making you feel better about everything that is troubling you now."

Elizabeth sighed. "Charlotte, you are so good to me. But truly, I am fading too fast even to think, let alone surrender to an emotional outburst. Right now, my best remedy will be to simply fall asleep."

"Of all the gentlemen for this to happen with, it's quite amazing for you to have been compromised with Mr. Darcy, the very man who had proposed to you once already. Perhaps it's meant to be, don't you think?"

With a frown, she answered, "Charlotte, before all of this happened, I thought I understood the gentleman well and found I was completely wrong. Now I realize I know practically nothing about him, and the idea of becoming the wife of a man who is almost a stranger quite frightens me."

Charlotte gave her shoulder a little squeeze as she rose to depart. "Don't worry about it, Lizzy, it will not be so bad. Matters of this nature have a habit of working themselves out."

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The gentlemen did not return to the room until the surgeon was there with them, and Charlotte came along to make sure they did not upset Elizabeth too much. After examining the ankle the surgeon declared that it was not broken, then bound it up so Elizabeth would find it easier to walk.

"I must caution you, however, to do very little walking over the next week. I can have my man come by with a cane and cut it to measure for you within the hour, but I recommend you simply use it to make your way to your bed for some rest. I am quite certain that Mrs. Collins, her sister, or even the maid will each be perfectly willing to ensure your comfort while you give your leg some time for healing."

"Yes, yes, of course, we will," said Charlotte with an enthusiastic smile. "Though I dare say our biggest trouble won't be with the patient, but with the gentleman who brought her home."

Darcy stopped pacing and gave Charlotte a keen look, blushing slightly and even biting briefly at his bottom lip before giving a response. "We ought not to wait on the cane right now but help Miss Elizabeth to her bed before she completely passes out. She took that laudanum some time ago and may be too dizzy to manage such a transfer in another hour."

"Mr. Darcy does have the right of it," Elizabeth agreed, her words slurred just a little. "I do not think I am at all ready to attempt such a walk even now."

“We shall transport you just as we did before,” said Darcy, and he stepped over to pick Elizabeth up. “Mrs. Collins, if you will show me the way to her room?”

Charlotte guided Darcy up the steps as he carried Elizabeth, and she found that she was perfectly comfortable in his arms. She may be frightened to marry the gentleman, but she could not deny that he did indeed have his charms.

The smile he gave her as she settled into the pillows made Elizabeth’s stomach flutter, and her face and limbs go warm. She could not recall exactly how or when her attraction to the man had started to grow, and yet at that moment, she realized it was in full flower. That, or the laudanum had surely completely taken over. Or perhaps it was a bit of both, she told herself as she felt the room begin to spin around her.

“We’ll leave you to sleep now, Lizzy,” he told her as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You and Mariah are of a height to each other. The man with the cane can simply use her as your model.”

Elizabeth attempted to nod, but it felt strange, confirming to her that the drug was most decidedly upon her now. “Thank you, sir,” she managed to whisper.

He smiled. “We are engaged now, Elizabeth. You should probably start to address me in more familiar terms.”

She giggled at this. “But how? I cannot call you Fitz, if that’s what everyone calls the colonel. I have no idea what name I would use.”

He grinned. “My sister calls me Will, though I do not think you’re quite ready to do that yet, are you?”

She shook her head, blushing profusely at the thought. “No, sir, I think that should wait yet a while.”

He lifted her hand, kissing her knuckles. “Then I suppose Darcy will do for now.”

“All right, Darcy,” she agreed softly, wishing he hadn’t let her hand go. When he moved away, she almost felt disappointed. Almost. Some of her misgivings where he was concerned still lingered, but she was convinced they would fall away once they grew more familiar

with each other. At least, she certainly hoped so. She did not wish to be married to a gentleman she continued to dislike.

“Sweet dreams, Elizabeth,” he replied. “I shall call upon you tomorrow.”



# Chapter 10

Darcy wasn't sure how he was supposed to break the news of his adventure with Elizabeth and their subsequent engagement to Lady Catherine and the rest of his family. Certainly, Anne would be overjoyed at the thought of him marrying someone else since it would remove any danger that her mother would finally manage to get her way. But Fitz would not be pleased with the decision, as he had recently hinted at the idea of courting the lady for himself, and the book that Hoof had stolen and mangled had been a gift from him to Elizabeth.

As he walked back to Rosings, however, he had not considered that news by servant can travel much faster than news by society, so the tale of Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet found alone together in the brewery storage room had reached the ears of his aunt well before he had any opportunity to tell her.

"Darcy? Where have you been?" she asked in a shrill tone even before he'd reached the parlor where he knew she would be waiting. "I must speak with you at once, sir!"

"Forgive me, Aunt, but I would much prefer to change into my evening attire before having such a discussion," he replied as he headed for the stairs.

His aunt was far too polite a person to follow him, though she would wait with great impatience for him to return, and it was equally certain that both Fitz and Anne were also waiting with her. He comforted himself with the fact that he'd done nothing wrong and that he had behaved like a gentleman while locked in with Miss Elizabeth, but he knew that Lady Catherine would not be pleased to know that he'd made an offer to her. He might choose to let her believe it had been made due to the compromising position, though that was hardly the case since the true offer had been extended a few days earlier.

Fitz, too, he'd rather not tell about when the offer had been made, though in truth, even in that he'd done nothing untoward, as he had done the asking before his cousin had made any overtures that would suggest an interest in Elizabeth that went beyond just friendship. Yet, he was certain that Fitz would not like the news one bit, not just

because of his own interest in Elizabeth, but also because society would be less than pleased, and he was as much a stickler for following the rules of society as the rest of their family.

Though he would have preferred to linger in his rooms over facing such ire, Darcy had never been the sort of person to hide, and he wasn't about to start now. As soon as he'd changed clothes, he immediately came downstairs, bracing himself for a whole lot of displeasure from his family members.

"This is an outrage, sir," Lady Catherine started in as soon as he entered the door. "What possible reason could you have for being trapped in a storage room with Miss Elizabeth Bennet? I certainly hope you are aware that a girl such as her, with no dowry to speak of and very little pedigree, is just the type who would attempt to ensnare you into a marriage. You should have stayed well away from her."

"Madam, you are mistaken," Darcy said defensively. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet did nothing to create this situation. It was that blasted Hoof who is the cause. I have it on very good authority that the last thing the young woman would do would be to marry someone simply for his fortune. Her mother might wish such a match, but as for herself, Elizabeth would find such a circumstance quite appalling."

"And how exactly do you know that, sir?" his aunt continued in her most high and mighty tone.

"During our time at Meryton and our time here, I have come to know her opinion on such matters quite well," Darcy replied, frowning at the memory of their misunderstandings, which they still had yet to fully work out.

"The pair of you were certainly having cross words just a few days ago," Fitz added, his eyes slightly narrowed. "Miss Elizabeth was quite upset over it while you were gone, and it fell to me to cheer her up."

"Yes, as to that – " Darcy added, grimacing now. "I believe Hoof may have devoured the poetry book you gave her. It is the reason Elizabeth chased her into the brewery to begin with, and the reason I was chasing after her, hoping she would not hurt herself while she was in there. Alas, she did injure her ankle and I had to carry her back to the parsonage. In full view of anyone who should have happened to look."

“Good God, man, you knew how I felt about her,” Fitz grumbled. “I must assume you have made her an offer?”

“Of course I did,” Darcy said as if he should already know. “And she willingly accepted it, for she dearly loves her sisters and would never endanger their chances of making good matches for themselves.”

“I do not see that she must marry you over this,” Lady Catherine grumbled. “You are already betrothed to my daughter. What is Anne supposed to do if you go off and marry some commoner?”

“Aunt Catherine, Anne, and I agreed years ago that such a wedding would never occur,” he replied. “If she does anything at all, it will be to finally go and find a gentleman who is more suited to her, and who she does not think of as her brother.”

“Is this true, daughter?”

“It is,” Anne said with a nod, unable to look at her.

Lady Catherine was floored, but only for a moment. “I do not condone such a match, sir. If you do marry the girl, I shall not be in attendance, and you’ll not have my blessing in the matter. And mark my words, Darcy, that young woman knew precisely what she was about. Do you not see how much this match will benefit her sisters?”

“Of course, I do,” Darcy agreed. “But it is through no fault of her own. I will not allow you to continue to abuse her honor. And as for her sisters, though she has not asked, it is my intention to sponsor every last one of them if it is required to find them husbands. Forgive me, Fitz, for what has happened, but it is done now and cannot be undone. Perhaps you might like one of the sisters.”

His cousin sighed at this. “Yes, perhaps you are right. It will take time for the wound to heal, but at least it happened now, rather than after I had declared myself.”

Lady Catherine glared at them both. “Why my nephews should both be so fascinated by such an ordinary girl, I cannot tell. But come along, then. I’m not going to let this travesty interrupt our supper. You will, of course, be leaving again for London soon, Darcy, will you not?”

Darcy shrugged. "My plans are not set, Aunt. We have sent for Elizabeth's father and shall resolve such issues upon his arrival. However, I can certainly go to stay at the parsonage if you would prefer."

"In truth, I would prefer to have never laid eyes on Miss Elizabeth Bennet at all. But you know I would never cast you out nor treat anyone in an unkind manner. It would go completely against my charitable nature."

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After the cold indifference and frequent mutterings of his miffed aunt, Darcy had no great trouble stepping out of the manor and walking the short distance to the parsonage to check in on his intended. He couldn't help thinking that they had stepped over the huge gap that had separated them before, but there was still a bridge between them that he doubted Elizabeth would brave until after they'd spoken their vows. Intimacy would surely be the way to finally reach her heart.

"Darcy, there you are," Elizabeth called out briskly from the sofa in the main parlor as the maid showed him in. He had expected that she'd be in her bed, where he would get to see her but briefly and in company, yet here she sat using a breakfast tray as a writing desk as she penned a letter. "I know that you and Mr. Collins sent for Papa yesterday, but it would surely have left Mama and my sisters in quite an uproar, don't you think? I thought perhaps I would send them something reassuring, but – I don't know quite how I should word it."

Darcy chuckled. "Just tell them my dog did me a great favor."

"Did she, now?" she replied with a smirk. "How do you know I won't be a complete shrew who will soon drive you out of the house as much as possible?"

Now he laughed outright as he stepped over and lifted her knuckles to his lips. "Even if you tried, you are too good of a person to continue in it for much time. You would be far too interested in the next good book or in teasing somebody to a distraction to play such a

role.”

She giggled. “As to that, sir, you do make a most excellent target, though I’m certain the manner of that teasing is likely to change over time.”

“Yes, that is my fondest hope.”

“How can such a cynic hide a heart so filled with notions of romance?” she teased him further.

“He must be met with a lady who stirs it in him,” Darcy told her as he settled into a nearby chair. “Sometimes that is all it takes.”

“Then I shall endeavor to continue in it, sir, for I dearly love to see your smile.”

# Chapter 11

It was no great surprise that Elizabeth received no further invitations to visit Rosings, considering the fact that Lady Catherine knew of her injury, but also the fact that she must be quite put out by Elizabeth usurping her own daughter's position. For though Anne herself may not have had any interest in marrying Darcy, her mother had spent years anticipating such a result.

"Lizzy, I am amazed at the transformation in Mr. Darcy over the last two days," Charlotte told her on the third morning after her injury and subsequent engagement. "He has been everything civil and exhibited something much more like the colonel's playfulness than his own dour attitude. Perhaps married life with him will not be such a chore after all. I am going to invite the whole household at Rosings to tea this afternoon, though I daresay Lady Catherine will not wish to join the party."

"If only she would understand that it was through no design of my own that Hoof is such a willful doggie," Elizabeth commented dryly. "You would think she'd be well aware of it after the canine has been on her property for over a month now and seemingly no closer to the goal which brought her here."

Charlotte smirked. "Perhaps if Hoof and Brute were locked in the storage room for an hour, it might help."

Elizabeth's jaw dropped at such a comment, then dropped further as she noticed that the maid had just opened the door to admit Mr. Darcy just in time to hear it as well.

"Charlotte Collins!" she exclaimed, going so red she thought her cheeks would burst.

"Forgive me, Mr. Darcy, I had no idea you were here!" said Charlotte, her own face even redder.

"No harm done, Mrs. Collins," he told her. "In fact, I found the concept quite amusing myself. Perhaps not the storage room, of course, but something equally free of escape routes. And how are you doing this morning, my dear?"

Elizabeth finally was able to meet Darcy's eyes, though thoughts of her own incarceration in that place leading to the result Charlotte had just mentioned continued to give her color. She had no idea of the mechanics of such a venture, of course, but knew that once she became this man's wife, she would soon discover what they were, which left her feeling decidedly nervous but also quite warm as their eyes met and held. She wondered if the gentleman's thoughts had wandered in that direction as well.

"I am doing a little better today, sir," she told him. "I managed to reach the sofa today without Charlotte and Mariah's help."

"Excellent. I'm pleased to hear it," he said, smiling. "I received a letter this morning stating that your father shall arrive in Kent tomorrow afternoon, having been slightly delayed due to a need to finish up planting one of his fields."

"Yes, I have gotten a letter this morning as well," she said, nodding. "I suppose that tomorrow it will all be official."

"And I shall post the banns soon after," Darcy added. "I will need to go to London before I can return to Pemberley to make our home ready for your arrival."

"Our home," she repeated, blushing another time.

"Where I hope to make you exceedingly happy for years to come," he added as he settled in a chair beside her.

"Mr. Darcy, I just sent an invitation over to Rosings inviting everyone for tea," Charlotte told him. "I do hope at least Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Anne will come to visit me. Just because my friend has hurt her ankle should not mean I must be deprived of all my company."

"It is certain that my aunt shall not come," said Darcy. "She announced herself quite indisposed this morning and was still in her rooms when I left Rosings."

"Poor woman," Elizabeth said sadly. "I do hope she has not stressed herself into such a state over me."

Darcy reached over and covered one of her hands with his own. "Do not worry yourself over that, Elizabeth, it was not your doing, but

only time and observation are going to convince my aunt that you have not purposely secured my hand just to have the use of my money. I hope that you will forgive her for it, as she does not know you nearly as well as the rest of us do.”

“Yes, I can easily forgive her vanity, sir, since she can only comprehend the matter from whence she was taught,” said Elizabeth with a shrug. “Her parents are peers, are they not?”

“Indeed, yes,” said Darcy, shrugging himself. “And I can easily understand her thoughts since I have been guilty of such notions myself, though not where your family is concerned since I quickly understood that both you and Jane, at least, took no interest in the pursuits suggested by your mother.”

“I pray you will forgive my mother just as I must forgive your aunt,” Elizabeth added. “She, too, is merely the product of what she’s been taught.”

“Such a morbid discussion,” called out Fitz as the maid admitted him and Anne into the room. “I hope the entire afternoon will not be taken up with such thoughts!”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, Miss Anne, how good of you to come!” called Charlotte happily as she moved to greet her guests. “I am sorry that my husband will not be available today to join us. A member of the parish is quite ill, and the doctor told the family they ought to call for him, so he has been gone a few hours now, and I do not expect him back for yet a while.”

“Miss Elizabeth? I was told by my cousin that your poetry book was quite lost to you, and so I took the liberty of purchasing another,” Fitz announced as he pulled out a new tome from his coat pocket. “I insist you receive it, as an assurance of peace between us. And, if I have learned your character correctly, I’ll expect this one shall soon become just as dog-eared as the last – though hopefully it will not meet the same fate.”

Elizabeth giggled, and any tension she had expected between herself and the colonel was quickly dispelled as she received the little book from him as Darcy looked on, smiling contentedly.

“Thank you, Colonel Fitzwilliam, it is a most gracious offering and one I shall cherish as coming from my new cousin, for that is



what you shall be to me soon enough. And I suspect you'll be quite a merry one. But now that Darcy is to marry me, Miss Anne, perhaps you ought to set your cap at this rascal."

Anne blushed. "Am I to be forever attached to a cousin, then, Miss Elizabeth? Can I not enjoy the idea of finding some gentleman I do not yet know but who is in need of my lands for at least a few days before I once again find myself paired off?"

"Surely, now that I've foiled her plans your mother shall never allow you out of the house again," Elizabeth added in a mock-sinister tone. "I can assure you, Miss Anne, it was never my design to take Mr. Darcy from you."

"Never fear, madam, I had no designs of keeping him."

"Well then, I supposed we have jested with one another long enough, and all the cakes have been devoured," Fitz said after they'd continued on in that manner for some while. "Come along, Darcy, we cannot deprive Lady Catherine of our presence at the dinner table, and Anne is growing tired."

"There is nothing wrong with becoming tired from so much laughter," Anne told him with a smile. "In truth, so much merriment will do me much more good than harm, I find. Though you are right, Fitz, I believe I could use a nap before we must deal with another night of my mother while she is in one of her moods. Elizabeth? I truly wish to welcome you to the family while we are not in her presence, for it is certain that while in it I never shall."

"Mothers do mean well, I suppose," Elizabeth replied with a little frown. "I am only imagining that my own is about to become much worse!"

Darcy rose, capturing Elizabeth's hand as he did so and drawing it up to kiss. "I shall be here early tomorrow in anticipation of Mr. Bennet's arrival. I know you are anxious to be up and about again already, Elizabeth, but please do try to stay off your ankle."

"I can only promise to try, sir," she replied.

## Chapter 12

To say that he was nervous the following morning would have been a severe understatement. For all that he knew Elizabeth's mind in the matter, he knew little of her father and did not know how the gentleman would react once he understood everything that had transpired. Mr. Bennet did not strike Darcy as hot-headed, but given the nature of his wife, Darcy suspected it must be the complete opposite. Mr. Bennet must have the patience of a saint.

Yet it would still be wise to anticipate at least a little antipathy once he discovered the truth. No father would like to know that his daughter had been trapped in a dark room for over an hour, whether she'd been in there with a gentleman or not. The mere fact that Elizabeth had an ankle injury would probably be annoying to him.

"Do not look so grave, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Collins teased him as they settled into his private study together. "My cousin should be quite pleased with the idea of joining our families, even if Lady Catherine is not. I do feel badly for Miss Anne in this, of course, for she is losing an intended spouse, but I have heard that it was a match neither of you cared for."

Darcy smirked. "Where did you hear such news?"

"From Lady Catherine herself, of course," he told him. "She and I had a long talk after my sermon yesterday, and I made plain to her that the Lord works in mysterious ways. For you and Anne, perhaps the whole thing is something of a blessing since yours was never a love match and you've each been avoiding it for years. In time Lady Catherine may come to agree to that, though she is quite blind to it at present. After all, had you married against your wishes it could not be a happy life you would have shared. Once she understands that fact, your aunt will surely come to accept Lizzy and welcome her into the fold."

"I pray that you are right, sir, but I must attest to the fact that Lady Catherine is one of the most stubborn women I've ever known."

Mr. Collins smirked now. "More stubborn than Elizabeth, sir?"

Darcy couldn't stop the sly smile that touched his lips. "Perhaps

not.” Mr. Collins was not a man he had ever expected to share a joke with, but then again once he married Elizabeth the two of them would become cousins too. It would take a bit of getting used to, having new relatives to interact with, but at least it was good to know that they might be able to get along.

The two men glanced to the window at the sound of a coach out front and had a clear view of the driveway without needing to stand up, though of course they soon stood up anyway since the gentleman they were waiting for was just emerging from a hired coach, and one of its footmen was already bringing down three bags that belonged to him. Another man, presumably in Mr. Bennet’s service, accompanied him.

“Cousin Edward! How good of you to come!” Mr. Collins called as he and Mr. Darcy stepped out the door together.

“How could I not, sir, with news such as this?” Mr. Bennet pointed out with a look somewhere between a stern reprimand and a joyful welcoming. An expression that made clear to Darcy that although the gentleman welcomed the idea of a match he was waiting for further explanation before passing any judgment upon it. Very appropriate and promising to Darcy’s way of thinking.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Bennet,” said Darcy, shaking the man’s hand.

“A very great pleasure for you, I hope,” he replied with a slight smile. “I understand that you have made an offer for my daughter, sir, but it was unclear from your letter just precisely what may have been the cause.”

Darcy blushed slightly. “Sir, I can assure you that your daughter has long been foremost in my heart. Perhaps certain circumstances may have pushed things along, but I did not feel it prudent to place a retelling of such events in a letter, which might easily be read by someone other than yourself.”

“Very sound reasoning, to be sure,” Mr. Bennet agreed. “And I would like to speak with you further and learn a great deal more about it, yet first I must go and see my Lizzy. I am quite certain she has been missing her Papa.”

“Do not be alarmed when you see her, sir,” Darcy added. “Her

ankle is not broken, but it was badly sprained in a fall, and the surgeon still has not declared it ready to unbind, though he is expected to come by to have another look this afternoon.”

“My curiosity of this week’s events grows apace,” Mr. Bennet replied as the three men headed for the front door and soon entered the main parlor, where Elizabeth was lying on the couch reading the new poetry book she’d gotten from Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Papa!” she exclaimed happily, forgetting she couldn’t stand up and fly into his arms and nearly tripping with the effort. Darcy immediately caught her before she fell and delivered her to her destination, and Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her father’s waist as he took over holding her up.

“I see you’ve had yet another misadventure this week, my dear daughter,” he commented dryly. “And by the sounds of it, quite an interesting one. Would the two of you care to explain how this whole marriage proposal came about?”

“Before I explain it in its entirety, Papa, you must first understand that Darcy asked for my hand before any of the events took place, and I was – considering my answer when they occurred. I had intended to tell him that I wanted a little more time to get to know one another and be sure of things first, before making such an important decision, but now – well, now that things have happened thus, we shall have to become acquainted as husband and wife and hope for the best.”

“I have a large and rather mischievous dog, sir, with a propensity for stealing things that do not belong to her,” Darcy explained further. “Elizabeth was reading, and Hoof stole her book, and while she gave chase, she fell and injured her ankle, and while I was attempting to help, I chased after them. Somehow we got locked together in a storage room for over an hour. But on the plus side, it gave us a chance to talk things out. Those details which helped to fuel Elizabeth’s hesitation have now been somewhat ironed out.”

“Yes, Papa, Mr. Darcy is not the monster I painted him out to be, for which I have profusely apologized. And you have no idea how grateful I am in it, too, since I would never wish to marry someone I could not like.”

“I see that it is clearly a compromising circumstance, Lizzy, and I understand that you would not wish to see harm befall your sisters

because of it,” said Mr. Bennet, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Yet, at the same time, I would never ask you to do something that would lead to your unhappiness. Are you certain that you and Mr. Darcy will get on since until this very moment all I’ve heard you say of him was less than kind in nature? And forgive me for saying it, but you are both rather temperamental, are you not?”

Elizabeth blushed and moved to sit down again.

“We are,” she agreed. “Yet, we are both reasonable people as well. There are several things about the gentleman I quite like. He is excellent at cards, his sense of humor is quite similar to my own, and he has a great love of walking just as I do. I believe there is enough there to begin to work upon anything we do not agree on.”

“I am glad you think so, my dear,” Darcy said with a smile.

“And I am not at all surprised that she did not mention your wealth,” Mr. Bennet pointed out slyly. “She takes after me, rather than her mother, in her manner of thinking, I believe. Your wealth would never be a great priority in her decision, though of course if you were a homeless pauper I should have to deny such a union. However, since there is to be a wedding, and such things are considered a business matter whether we like it or not, you and I should probably discuss the particulars, sir.”

Darcy nodded. “Mr. Collins has offered us the use of his study to that end, sir. Let us leave Elizabeth to rest and talk together there.”

Mr. Bennet followed Darcy to the other room and they each settled into chairs there. The father began in earnest, “I must first stress to you, sir, the nature of Elizabeth’s dowry, which is but two thousand in total. I know that you are quite wealthy and have no need of more treasure, but I would not insult you by failing to provide those monies as required.”

Darcy shook his head. “I’ll hear nothing of taking funds from you, Mr. Bennet. In fact, I am pleased to now be in a position to offer you my help instead. Longbourn could use a few improvements if my memory of the place is clear. I’ll not insult this discussion with further comments about that now, but once you are officially my father-in-law, I shall wish to talk of it further.”

“You are too generous, Mr. Darcy,” Mr. Bennet told him. “And, of

course, you shall be my son-in-law, for clearly I cannot refuse your proposals since Lizzy's reputation and that of my other daughters would greatly suffer if I did such a thing."

"As to your other daughters, I know just the thing to please their Mama, sir," Darcy added with a smile. "I shall do everything in my power to throw them in the paths of rich gentlemen by bringing them along for my sister Georgiana's first Season. Clearly, she will not be having it this year, since Easter has already come and gone, but next year seems like perfect timing for such an endeavor."

Mr. Bennet chuckled. "My wife will die and go to heaven when she hears such news. Perhaps we should hold off on it to surprise her later."

"Excellent, then all that remains is to decide upon the time and place of the wedding," said Darcy, smiling. "Shall we return to our little invalid so she can help with that decision?"

"Sir, I can already tell that you and Lizzy will be perfectly amiable together."

# Chapter 13

“I’ve heard such praise of Pemberley that I find myself in awe of it even before it has ever met my eyes. Yet, I cannot simply go off to another life without first returning to Longbourn to say good-bye to all the places and people I have loved in my life thus far,” Elizabeth had told everyone, and so it was agreed that she should return to Longbourn for a month while Darcy took care of some business in London and then went to Pemberley to prepare the house for its new mistress.

Now, one week later, Elizabeth was comfortably settled in the parlor among her sisters, and thankfully their mother had given them a moment of peace by heading off to visit with Mrs. Long. For a certainty, she had gone with the sole purpose of bragging about Elizabeth’s engagement to the wealthy Mr. Darcy, but Elizabeth was so grateful for her absence that even knowing her affairs were being spread throughout the whole of Hertfordshire did little to ruin her mood.

“Oh, Jane, I never would have believed I would become Mistress to such a great house,” she told her sister nervously. “It will be a most taxing undertaking, to be sure, but I find myself looking forward to the challenge.”

“And to the marriage itself?” Jane teased her.

“Darcy is quite handsome, is he not?” she pointed out. “One could do far worse than to marry such a gentleman. But by all accounts, he will do much more nicely than Mr. Collins.”

The two of them giggled, but then Elizabeth grew serious. “But there is one thing I must tell you, and I pray you will forgive him for it, just as I am trying to do. It was not just Bingley’s sisters who talked him into returning to London to separate the two of you, but also Darcy himself. He believed you to be indifferent to his friend and wished to prevent him from being taken in by a woman in want of his fortune. He believed that our Mama insisted on you setting your cap at him, but now he understands that it was not a want of affection, but your reserved manner, which held you back from showing more of your true feelings. He has told me he will do all in his power to remedy his interference, and I believe him.”

Jane sighed. "It was more the actions of our mother than any lack of actions on my part, I am quite certain. Mama means well enough, but she must be made to see that blatantly discussing matters of marriage and money at a ball where anyone might overhear her is not to be desired. Only think, if we do marry well, as you certainly shall do soon enough, our spouses will not wish for such displays in front of their loftier guests."

"I should think not," Elizabeth agreed. "Especially if such were done in front of a single gentleman of consequence who might otherwise have taken an interest in one of her unmarried daughters. I fear for the fates of our younger sisters if she does not improve her manners."

"But Lizzy, you must know that the fault remains with Bingley," Jane insisted. "He allowed his sisters and his friend to convince him to leave and not to return to me again. And even if he does return, how shall I endure the thought that Caroline, who seemed so kind while she was here, was, in fact, plotting against me the entire time? Is it possible to become sisters with such a false friend?"

"You have plenty of sisters without her if she cannot be made to accept your marriage," Elizabeth pointed out. "I say that if Bingley should come to you, that you must accept him immediately and enjoy your happiness. It's not Caroline you would be marrying, nor is it Louisa."

Jane smiled as she thought about this, but then her face fell even more. "Goodness, Lizzy, I wonder what Caroline Bingley will think of your engagement to Mr. Darcy! I had not thought of it, but it was quite obvious that the woman wanted Mr. Darcy for herself."

Elizabeth blanched. "I cannot think about that now. It can hardly matter since she will never have her wish. Surely she will get over it."

"Yes, of course," Jane agreed. "For all that she can be cruel, she can also be kind. Perhaps there is something within her that can be reasonable."

"I pray that you are right, Jane, for surely if her brother will be at my wedding, then Miss Caroline Bingley will be there as well. Do not forget that the entire Bingley family has long been friendly with the Darcy family. I would not be surprised if the Hursts attend as well."



“Goodness, I dearly want to be at your wedding, of course, Lizzy, but to be confronted with every Bingley in existence at once after so long an absence, it sounds quite daunting, does it not?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Do not be troubled by it, Jane. Just be your sweet and loving self, and Bingley will remember precisely why he was so enamored of you. And even his sisters will have no sway this time if Darcy will not help them with such a cause. Perhaps you should find some time alone together to talk. It certainly does seem to help.”

Jane smiled. “Do you think I could borrow Hoof for an hour?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Who knows? Darcy does owe you a favor, does he not?”

“Goodness, what can the two of you be discussing that has you laughing thus?” asked Lydia from across the room.

“Gentlemen, of course,” Kitty answered for her. “Do you not see them blush?”

“It must be wonderful to be in love,” said Lydia with a sigh. “I fancy I should like it very much myself. But speaking of gentlemen, Lizzy, I must inform you of who we met in Meryton this afternoon. Though, of course, his regiment moved on to Briton recently, Mr. Wickham has briefly returned on business for the militia, and Mama has invited him to dine with us tonight.”

“Mr. Wickham?” Elizabeth repeated, feeling a wave of trepidation pass over her. “I’m not certain it’s wise for me to spend much time in that gentleman’s company when he and my fiancé have such a strong dislike between them.”

“Nonsense, Lizzy, it will do no harm to say hello to your old friend,” Mrs. Bennet admonished her. “For certainly now that you are engaged, his attentions will no longer fall on you. It is my Lydia we will want him to notice, not you.”

“I do so love a gentleman who is also an officer,” Lydia cooed. “And Wickham is quite the most handsome officer in his regiment, I find. Would it not be grand if he should make me an offer, and I could follow along with the militia wherever they go, just as some of the

other wives do?"

"Though, of course, you'll want to establish a residence once you begin to have children, my dear," her mother reminded her. "It is most uncomfortable to travel when you are great with child, and also a young child needs the stability that a constant residence would offer. I imagine the two of you could select one of the smaller houses right here in Hertfordshire so that you and your offspring could visit your Mama as often as possible."

"Mama, you ought not to encourage Lydia to dream of a gentleman who has not asked for her," Elizabeth reminded her. Though in truth, her concern was far greater than she was willing to let on. To hear Colonel Fitzwilliam tell it, George Wickham was the last man on Earth that Lydia should wish to marry. But she had asked after Wickham in confidence, and Fitz had given her no leave to repeat the report. She could not simply tell Lydia that Wickham was a man who would turn out to be false.

"That is your trouble, Lizzy. You never dream of anything," Lydia complained. "What harm is there in speculation? If he does not offer, perhaps another officer will. The house our mother dreams about would serve regardless of the suitor."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I confess, I have been dreaming of late. I am about to become Mistress to a large and famous manor and wife to a gentleman of consequence. I am quite thrilled at the prospect, I assure you. But perhaps a little frightened as well."

"Frightened?" Mrs. Bennet scoffed. "Whatever for?"

"That I'll not manage it as I ought," said Elizabeth with a little shudder.

"Nonsense, Lizzy, I have taught you to run a household well enough," she replied. "Yes, it shall be on a much larger scale, to be sure. But that's what all the servants are for. You make friends with the butler and the housekeeper, and they shall ensure that everything goes well. You shall be quite comfortable at Pemberley, mark my words."

# Chapter 14

Although Mrs. Bennet had decided upon holding a dinner party at the spur of the moment, she managed to invite along several other people to attend it. To ensure that Elizabeth made no attempt to hide away upstairs, she announced that the event was to be a celebration of her engagement, and she must surely be present to enjoy it.

“Honestly, Lizzy, I cannot understand you sometimes,” she scolded as Higgins, the new lady’s maid Darcy had insisted on hiring for her, pulled a brush through her hair. “You are to be a great lady, and with that comes – well, extra attention, obviously.”

They both glanced at Higgins, who had the sense to blush at their scrutiny.

“Higgins, do forgive the forthright manner of my family,” Elizabeth told her. “At Longbourn, we’ve had only one maid between us, and it was she who tended to us all throughout the years. I do take her meaning that you are here because I’ll be a woman of consequence. However, I shall never treat any servant of mine as though she is not even in the room. And neither shall my mother be allowed to take on such airs herself.”

“It was not an air, merely an observation,” Mrs. Bennet complained. “I’ll leave you two to prepare and expect my daughter downstairs in a timely manner.”

“Yes, madam,” Higgins replied as they watched her depart.

“It is most unkind,” Elizabeth commented when they were alone.

“It is part of the job,” Higgins told her. “Many great ladies and gentlemen give little to no consequence to the feelings of their servants. We are taught to be as invisible as possible and to close our ears against everything our employers might say to each other. Your kindness to me has been a welcome change, Miss Elizabeth.”

“You shall always have it,” she told her. “But if I must go down, I shall give them what they are looking for. I wish to wear the blue gown my mother had made for me while I was at Hunsford and with it the necklace of pearls that my sisters and I gathered as little girls.”

“An excellent suggestion,” she agreed, moving to get the items ready.

Mr. Wickham was seated among those guests who were already in the parlor when Elizabeth stepped into the room. Her ire rose just looking at the gentleman, yet she could not show any dislike of him without alerting her sisters to her changed regard where he was concerned, so she allowed him to bring her hand to his lips as usual and vowed to wash it later.

“Mr. Wickham, what a pleasure to find you at Meryton during my brief stay here,” she said, her tone a bit lofty. His face fell as he realized the warmth which usually passed between them was no longer there, but soon he dismissed it with the lifting of one brow.

“So, Mr. Darcy, eh?” he commented wryly. “I imagine he’s had plenty to say of me.”

“He’s said enough, sir,” she answered sweetly. “Though as I said to him, perhaps you have changed from the man he once knew and are much improved. He certainly voiced his doubts, but then again, I do not expect it matters much now since, as his wife, I shall be obliged to agree with him and need not form an opinion for myself.”

“That is a most noble sentiment,” he agreed. “If you will excuse me, madam?”

And thankfully, he did not return again to trouble her further but lavished as much attention on her sister Lydia as her youngest sister could ever wish for, much to the delight of their mother. And though she tried to find anything about the gentleman that she could bring forth as a fault without also mentioning what she knew about him, Wickham was on his best behavior and therefore beyond reproach.

“Ah, Miss Elizabeth, you shall make a lovely bride,” said Mrs. Long as she shook her hand. “I did not believe that Mr. Darcy had formed a particular attachment while he was in Meryton, but it is a most pleasant surprise to learn that I was wrong. I hope you will find much joy in your union with him.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Long, you are most kind,” Elizabeth replied.

The entire evening went along in much the same manner, with

friends and family members from Meryton arriving in a steady succession to offer Elizabeth their best wishes. Although some people even brought presents for the happy couple, Mrs. Bennet stressed to them all that this was in no way the official going away party for Elizabeth, which she planned to throw at the end of the month her daughter would be there.

“You must all certainly come then and give Lizzy a sending-off worthy of the future Mistress of Pemberley,” Mrs. Bennet told them. “I’m quite sure it will be the event of the season – well, at least the event of the season as we celebrate it here. It’s all quite exciting to know that at least one of my daughters will soon be settled, I can assure you.”

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Elizabeth felt as though the entire month stretched out far longer than she desired. Day by day, she found herself missing Darcy. It wasn’t so much a shift from not thinking of the gentleman to having him constantly on her mind, as it was a shift from once constantly thinking ill of him to now constantly wondering what he would think of everything that went on around her.

When she played whist with Lydia, Jane and Kitty, her thoughts strayed to a time when she had agreed to partner with Darcy against Jane and Bingley, and how well the two of them had done, winning nine of the ten games and losing the other only by the flip of the final card. But the memory now held a warmth in it that she couldn’t remember actually feeling at the time – or had it been there, but she’d stubbornly ignored it at the time. In any case, that little spark now resided in that memory, making her long for the time when she and Darcy would reunite.

Wickham stopped by some mornings over the first two weeks, but afterwards informed everyone that his time in Meryton had ended, and he must soon return to Brighton. “Our regiment is training for battle, you see. Wellington has said he has high hopes that the war will soon end, but I’ll wager Napoleon doesn’t see it that way.”

“I only make wagers with people who will pay me for winning,” Elizabeth commented dryly, earning a curious look from the

gentleman.

“I did not think you ever wagered anything,” he replied. “But no matter, there’s no point placing bets if both parties would place them on the same thing.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth agreed.

Strangely, though, it was in the middle of the night when Elizabeth seemed to long for Darcy the most, for it was at a time when she was completely alone with her thoughts. She did not miss anything they had yet done, but rather missed what she was hoping would become a routine between them.

Elizabeth’s own parents had separate rooms, but often slept together in her mother’s bed. And while she did not wish to speculate on what the two did when her father slept in his mother’s bed, of course she did wonder what generally did go on between married people when they were alone in such a manner. She knew, of course, that it involved being physically intimate, else they would get no children, yet now that they were older and wanted no other children, Elizabeth could not help but wonder why her parents would bother to lie together at all.

She thought back to the darkened storage room, with Darcy’s hands examining her leg, and wondered what it would be like to have his hands on other places, and without so much pain involved.

Elizabeth giggled and shook her head, silently admonishing herself for such thoughts. And yet they did persist, leaving her to wonder if all engaged young women might fantasize about what things would be like with her husband, and what sort of future they might have together.

And one of the first things she wanted, if it could be accomplished, was sleeping together through the night. She knew that Darcy hoped to win her heart, and she believed that closeness was a sure way to give him that. She didn’t quite know how she might make such a request, but she knew when the time had come that she would. If she wanted happiness in her marriage, she must be honest and open with her husband.

She could not deny that she held a certain attraction for Darcy that would make it easy for her to allow such liberties as he was likely

to hope for in their marriage bed. She just had no clear idea how all of that worked, and the thought of asking her mother about such things was something she abhorred.

“My husband will teach me that, I’m sure,” she told herself. But it didn’t stop her from wondering when or how he would.

They were to marry just one week after her arrival, and it seemed like hardly enough time to go from newly engaged to familiar enough with one another to explore such activities. While part of her hoped he would wait until they became more familiar with each other first, there was another, rather naughty part of her that hoped it would happen much sooner.

But there was so much more than just becoming a wife she would need to get used to. She was about to be placed in charge of numerous servants, the household accounts, and most likely running goods out to all the tenants as well. Surely, Georgiana was doing some of those chores now, but once she was the Mistress of Pemberley such responsibilities would soon fall to her.

# Chapter 15

“Welcome home, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy greeted his future wife with a smile and a bow. “I have arranged for you and your family to have a tour of Pemberley before you are shown to your rooms, but regrettably I cannot join you for it. I have business I must attend to in Lambton. I shall, of course, return tonight for the evening meal. But before I must leave you I’d like to introduce you to Miss Georgiana Darcy, my sister. I believe she is quite eager to be your tour guide.”

“Your business cannot wait, sir?” she asked him, her disappointment clear.

“It cannot,” he assured her, and he meant it most sincerely, for in his coat he had slipped a letter which he dared not entrust into the hands of anyone other than Sir Roland, the solicitor he had hired to help him with the specific issue for which the missive was addressed. Only Sir Roland could be completely trusted to bring the note into London and take the action desired on his behalf. If it was not for the fact that he was welcoming home his bride Darcy would surely have gone to London to deal with the matter himself.

“Goodness, this place must be as big as the palace,” Mrs. Bennet declared as she openly perused the double doors at the top of a set of steps which led into a grand foyer. Pillars, paintings, and statuary adorned the area, lending it a sumptuous appearance.

“It is not quite so large as that, ma’am,” he told her, tipping his hat as he stepped aside and allowed the others to enter. “Alas, I must leave you all here with my sister. Enjoy yourselves, and then get in a bit of rest, and I shall return to you all as soon as possible.” He lifted Elizabeth’s hand, kissing her knuckles. “I am happier than you know to see you, my dear. Perhaps later I shall give you a tour of my mother’s favorite garden.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I would like that, sir.”

“Then I shall see you later.”



“Sir Roland, I am certain you can understand why I want you to deal with as many of these difficulties yourself as you can right now,” Darcy told the gentleman he met at the Rose and Crown. “I am about to be married, and I do not want any of these matters to ruin that celebration. I hired you because you are known to handle such matters with delicacy. I trust we understand each other?”

“Indeed, sir, my men have already found a suitable house and they are converting it to the specific purpose even now,” Sir Roland said, nodding. “Very soon, things should be settled just as you desire.”

“Good man,” Darcy said, shaking his hand. “I am off, then. I believe I shall shop for a gift for my bride while I am in Lambton. Godspeed to you, sir.”

Darcy stopped off at a nearby shop to buy Elizabeth a present. He knew how much she had enjoyed the rose garden at Rosings while she’d been there, so he purchased a gold chain with a pendant in the shape of a rose which he intended to present to her on their wedding night.

When he thought of their wedding night, a warmth spread all through him. Obviously part of it was a physical anticipation, though he had no intention of rushing things between himself and Elizabeth. He was more than willing to give her time to adjust to the situation, though with the full intention of using every inducement to lead her into a physical relationship in a manner that would be comfortable for her. He longed for that closeness to arise between them, yet he knew he would savor every moment that led up to it as well.

When he returned to Pemberley there was but an hour until the evening meal, and as he’d expected all the Bennets were abovestairs in their rooms, probably sleeping after the long ride from Hertfordshire to Derbyshire, which they’d taken in stages over the last three days.

Supper was a great source of amusement for Darcy as he witnessed the awed looks on the faces of the young ladies. Kitty and Lydia Bennet were both quite open in their excitement as they stepped into the dining hall, where the table was intimately set only at one end, the easier for the diners to speak together. Had the table been put to full use and he had placed Elizabeth at the far end, they might need to shout or send a footman back and forth in order to converse, and that was not something Darcy would have cared for.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, I had no idea that Pemberley had quite so many gardens and two different lakes? Oh, it is all so wondrous. I confess I practically swooned my way to bed earlier. And such a bed! Never have I been more comfortable in my life, sir!” Mrs. Bennet was enthused.

“I am pleased that you find everything to your satisfaction, Mrs. Bennet,” he replied, casting Mr. Bennet a slight smile and a wink, for he was certain that gentleman had already been the recipient of such praises throughout the afternoon.

The ladies all retired to the blue parlor together, while Darcy and Mr. Bennet headed to another parlor to share some port and cigars. Darcy asked him, “Do you play billiards, Mr. Bennet?”

“Sir, I have never seen a billiards table in person, I must confess,” he answered. “I am not a gentleman interested in visiting London much, and even in Meryton the notion of visiting a club held no interest for me. However, I should like to try it sometime if you are amenable.”

“Indeed, though perhaps not tonight when it is certain the ladies will crave my company, and I have promised your daughter a brief walk under the stars.”

“I would never deny a young man his chance at wooing a young woman who is simply not yet aware that she’s already very much in love.”

Darcy raised a brow. “Do you believe so?”

“‘Methinks she doth protest too much’,” he quoted, grinning as he took a drag on his cigar. “If she comes to love you as much as she has hated you, sir, you will be a fortunate man indeed.”

“Well, then, perhaps I will soon find out,” Darcy replied. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” he agreed, and they walked together to rejoin the others.

“Miss Elizabeth, are you ready to see the secret garden now?” Darcy inquired.

“Yes, please,” she agreed as she rose, coming to take his arm.

“I see your ankle functions perfectly well now, my dear,” he commented as they headed for the door.

The evening air in late May was not too warm, but neither was it chilled as Darcy and Elizabeth stepped out into it, meaning that she had no need to bring along gloves or a wrap for the occasion. Unapologetic in the least, Darcy captured Elizabeth’s hand in his, holding it as they entered the little wonderland square of roses, peonies, and other blooms that made up the garden. At its center stood a large stone fountain with a Cupid figure at the center, his arrow taking aim at the entry gate.

“Oh, how lovely!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I am certain your mother spent many hours here.”

“She did,” Darcy affirmed. “And I as well, as a result of it. I come here whenever I wish to be close to her. I’ve brought you along because – I suppose this is the closest I can come to introducing you to her.”

Elizabeth smiled. “There’s that hidden romantic again.”

Darcy smiled. “I am romantic enough to want our happiness, Elizabeth. My heart belongs to you, but I know that you have not yet given me yours. And I want it very much. Do you think it is possible that you might do so, given a little time?”

She blushed, but she squeezed the hand that held hers and smiled. “I have no misgivings about the marriage, sir. That must be a start in the right direction, I believe.”

Darcy laughed. “Always so practical, my Lizzy. But perhaps tonight I might offer an inducement. I am your fiancé, after all.”

He tugged her into his arms and lightly brushed his lips on the tip of her nose.

Elizabeth giggled. “Sir, I think you have missed the mark.”

Darcy smiled, his lips claiming hers this time. “A kiss of promise.”

“What is the promise, sir?”

“That I shall always be a good and dutiful husband to you,” he whispered in her ear. “And that I shall always try to consider your feelings and needs.”

“And I promise to open my heart and allow you into it – as long as you are patient.”

“Now that is a promise worth just one more kiss before we return.”

# Chapter 16

It was unfortunate that the reunion with Mr. Bingley a few days later was also a reunion with his siblings. Regrettably, Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst were right on the heels of their brother, and though Mr. Hurst had also arrived with them, he almost immediately declared himself to be exhausted and disappeared upstairs.

The ladies, however, wasted no time in taking over the parlor, with Caroline offering to pour out the tea and Elizabeth politely allowing it. Caroline did not seem pleased that Bingley and Jane immediately gravitated to each other and seemed to take up right where they had left off.

“I must apologize for my long absence after we last saw each other,” he told the room at large. “I was much taken up with my business in Town and was unable to return to Netherfield. Though it is quite certain that I shall be able to spend the winter there this year.”

“That is wonderful news, Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Netherfield is such a dear old house, and much in want of attention after sitting vacant for so long. I do hope you intend to acquire a gardener, for the grounds are not nearly what they once were, and they have great potential to be improved.”

“Yes, the flowers at Longbourn were such a lovely sight, they have certainly inspired my desire for a garden full of such blooms,” he agreed. “Caroline has no eye for it, nor any interest in such pursuits. I shall most certainly require someone with a green thumb to help the cause by this time next year.”

The way he briefly glanced in Jane’s direction was not lost on Elizabeth. Nor was the fact that Caroline noticed the look as well, and her face fell. She quickly recovered, however, and soon stood up, saying, “Miss Elizabeth, I wonder if you would care for a turn or two out in the gardens here. Pemberley is such an excellent place to enjoy the outdoors, I find. It should be most edifying.”

Elizabeth blinked, but she could not think of a good excuse to avoid indulging Miss Bingley’s request. It would be quite rude to refuse one’s guest, and since this place was about to be her home, she could not possibly begin her new life here by shirking her duties in

such a manner.

Still, she could wish herself anywhere but at the side of a woman whose attempts to thwart her sister's happiness continued to upset her even now. She really had very little to say to Caroline and had been loath to even shake her hand.

"I do remember the little walks we took during your stay at Netherfield, Miss Elizabeth. Though I do think your assessment of the gardens there quite hit the mark, as did my brother's observations that such work is something I have never cared for," she said once they were out-of-doors. "You know that I had fond hopes of Georgiana taking them over, but alas, my brother has made it quite clear to me that such will never be her role."

"I see," Elizabeth replied woodenly.

"Yet it is hardly Netherfield that is on my mind at the moment, my dear friend," she added, her tone markedly conspiratorial.

"Will you come to the point, then, Miss Caroline?" Elizabeth asked her. "In my role as hostess to all the guests at Pemberley, it does seem rude to leave them for any decided length of time. Though I do admit that I needed a little fresh air, so a short walk will suit me just fine."

Caroline smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. "Very well, then, I shall. I wonder, Miss Elizabeth if you are truly acquainted with the gentleman you are about to marry."

Elizabeth scoffed. "Certainly, you would know him much better than myself, Miss Caroline, for your friendship has endured several years while my own knowledge of him is only beginning to climb. Yet, after clearing up a few matters that were troublesome for us, Darcy and I now seem to be getting along just fine."

"What I must tell you, Miss Elizabeth is a topic of a rather base nature. I would never speak of such things except out of a genuine concern for your happiness since I feel that during the time we spent together, we did become

acquainted and maybe even friendly toward each other. The word about Town is that Mr. Darcy recently purchased a house into which he installed a young woman who is – well, nobody knows much about

her at all. If I were you, I would keep a close watch on your husband. You know that gentlemen of stature rarely adhere to their marital vows.”

“Miss Caroline, such gossip!” Elizabeth exclaimed, backing away from her. “That you would bring me such news on the occasion of my wedding makes it a thousand times worse! By what manner have you come into such a tale?”

“I’ve had it from Mr. Hurst, who was certainly not worried about your sensibilities when he spoke of it, I can assure you,” she answered. “He told me that he saw Mr. Darcy walking with the young woman in question, and she appeared to be increasing. It leaves one to wonder how long the two have been acquainted with each other.”

Elizabeth frowned. “That Darcy was seen walking beside a woman great with child hardly proves that he is the one who created that child. There could be a dozen other explanations for it, to be certain. Perhaps the lady is a wife to one of his friends, or maybe she is a widow. Darcy is acquainted with men from the Colonel’s regiment as well, and any number of them might have called upon him to help because they were not able to attend to something themselves. When exactly did Mr. Hurst see the pair?”

“Not more than a month ago, I fear,” she added, casting Elizabeth a sympathetic look.

“There you have it, then,” said Elizabeth dismissively. “Darcy was called into Town to deal with an emergency involving one of his business pursuits last month. Perhaps this woman and that task were somehow intertwined.”

“Eliza Bennet, naïve indifference does not suit you,” Caroline scolded. “I have always found you to be one who would face the world in a more practical manner.”

“It would be most impractical in a bride to ask her groom if he has been unfaithful while they are busy trying to speak their vows,” she pointed out. “I have no hold over what Darcy may have done prior to the wedding itself. If he may have fathered a child, or if it is the child of another man, or if he has taken on mistresses before we have married each other, none of it has anything to do with me or the future that we will share. So, I will thank you for keeping such tattle-mongering to yourself after this.”

Caroline frowned. "Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, for trying to be a friend."

"I thank you for your concern, Miss Caroline, but I believe it to be misplaced," Elizabeth tried again. "I cannot condemn a man for something of which I have no proof, for I must say that the word of your brother-in-law, and no other, would never be enough. He may well have been mistaken in his observation, and we shall simply forget about it and leave it alone unless something more should happen to reveal the truth."

She smiled. "There, you see? Answered most practically. If it was me, I should have called him out on it immediately. But let us return to the parlor, for I am growing fatigued."

"Yes, I quite agree."

Elizabeth had dismissed Caroline's accusations while they were speaking. However, she found that she could not stop wondering if there might be any truth to what the woman had told her. It was quite astonishing to her that Mr. Darcy had declared to her his ardent love, then ran off to London and returned again with no real explanation for where he had gone. How did she know he had not gone off to London to see the young woman Miss Caroline had just told her of?

Elizabeth had at once assumed he'd gone off because he was angry with her initial refusal, yet what if it had been something else? As she had admitted, she knew very little of Darcy, and the circumstances surrounding their engagement were somewhat unusual. Yet, the fact remained that they would marry; for the sake of peace in their household, she knew she should simply let it go. After all, whatever he'd done before their marriage had nothing to do with her, and it wasn't as if she had given the gentleman her heart.



# Chapter 17

With so many guests now lurking at Pemberley, it was impossible for Darcy to find any chance to be with Elizabeth alone. With just three days left until they spoke their vows, he found himself seated at one end of the table between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet while Elizabeth was seated at the other between Georgiana and her sister Mary. Each of the two were leaning closer to speak in her ears, and whatever they were telling Elizabeth made her blush prettily.

Darcy's heart thundered as he watched them, and then her lovely eyes came up to meet his, making it thunder faster still. Yet the easy spark they'd shared before seemed somehow tempered now, as if something new might now be troubling her. Whatever it was, Darcy hoped to nip it in the bud. The last thing he desired was to have some misunderstanding ruin their new life together before it could even begin.

A bit of a dark cloud overshadowed him when he thought about that, for there were certain matters afoot in London that could easily cause him trouble and which he could not make known to Elizabeth, for a certain secrecy was required where those matters were concerned. He tried not to think about it, but even with the solicitor he had hired dealing with most of that particular trouble there would still be occasions when he needed to revisit the situation himself. Sir Roland was only buying him a small amount of time.

Thankfully, though, there would be no need for his presence in London for at least a few weeks. Time enough to convince his new wife to accept her fate and give him her heart. He smiled and sighed at the thought of it; he had loved Elizabeth for a long time now. It would be wonderful if she would love him too.

Remembering that he was meant to be conversing with the mother of his future wife proved quite difficult since all the woman wanted to talk of was the prospects of her remaining daughters, though with a marked absence of any mention of the eldest daughter, Jane.

Darcy could not believe that Mrs. Bennet was sensible enough to refrain from pointing out the attentions that Bingley had been lavishing on Miss Bennet since his arrival, but perhaps she worried

that any such observation might send that young gentleman running off another time, and so she was actually holding her tongue.

Darcy wished that he might suggest to her that she need not bother since he had it on good authority that Bingley had no intention of doing so. Though he had not blatantly declared it, Darcy knew well enough what was in his friend's thoughts concerning Jane. The time and manner of his declarations were not yet known, but he was certain that Bingley would eventually become his brother.

"Oh, sir, I cannot tell you how excited I am that you allowed me to help with the floral arrangements for the wedding supper," she was going on now. "I cannot believe it is but two more days until my darling daughter shall be Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy!"

"I have often observed that you have an eye for such details, Mrs. Bennet, and would never wish to deprive you of such a pleasure," he replied.

"But I do wish you would reconsider inviting Mr. Wickham to the wedding party," she added with a little frown. "He and Lydia have become such close friends lately, and I do remember a time when he and Elizabeth were good friends as well. It seems such a shame that you will not have the gentleman here when the two of you grew up here together."

"Madam, it is precisely the fact that we grew up together which prevents me from having him here," he replied. "I know that gentleman far too well to allow him anywhere near my fiancée or the rest of your daughters."

"Goodness, sir, you are certainly teasing me now," she declared. "But you must know I only ask for the sake of my youngest daughter. Lydia is quite put out to be deprived of her friend while she is here."

"Forgive me, Mrs. Bennet and Miss Lydia, but I must put an end to the matter here and now," Darcy told them. "I shall not have Mr. George Wickham at any party I ever hold, nor allow him entry into any of my households. I do not wish to discuss the matter further."

"Then I shall refrain from asking, sir," she replied and finally lapsed into silence while she ate her meal.

Darcy was certain this torture would never end, but eventually,

the evening was over, and every Bennet and Bingley in residence had gone abovestairs to their beds. Though he was quite convinced that Elizabeth would come down to the library to find a book, so he camped out down there with a hopeful expectation, and his anticipation of the young lady's inability to stay in her room was soon rewarded.

"Darcy, what are you doing here?" asked Elizabeth, her smile slightly teasing.

"I could not sleep, of course," he replied.

"Yes, sir, I seem to have acquired a similar affliction," she told him. "I certainly hope it is not catching."

He smiled. "Only among us, I imagine. It is the fault of our guests, I think, for they monopolized every moment this evening, leaving us in want of a chance for one of our own."

Elizabeth smirked up at him, and his eyes trailed down over her attire – a robe which no doubt surrounded a nightgown underneath, though he certainly would do nothing to discover if this was so.

"I know that I ought to behave as a proper gentleman and leave you to select your book," he said, trailing a finger over a loose curl that wrapped around one of her ears. "However, I find I am infinitely curious to see which of them you'll choose."

She chuckled warmly and shook her head at him. "Something boring, I should think. If I pick out anything interesting, I shall still be reading it in the morning and not have gotten any sleep at all."

"Well, I do have a book which goes into great detail about how to properly irrigate the crops, and the best rotation cycles to ensure that the lands do not go sour from overuse, and the like. Would that do the trick?"

"It might," she said, shrugging. "In any case, I shall ensure I do not find a little book of poems, for I did learn that you had Hoof delivered back to the kennels yesterday, and one never knows how long it may be before she escapes in search of more pages to eat."

Darcy rolled his eyes at her, saying, "But my dear girl, if not for Hoof's desire for devouring poetry pages, you would not be standing

in this library tonight. At least, not unless it was after reconsidering my first overtures and agreeing to be my wife, rather than succumbing to the interference of that canine.”

“Sir, I find that Hoof knew precisely what she was about.”

“How so?” he asked curiously.

“She wanted me around to play fetch with her all the time,” Elizabeth insisted playfully. “Now that I am here, and she has also returned home, I shall be at her constant beck and call, shall I not?”

Darcy loved this outrageous and playful side to Elizabeth very much, and he moved closer to her, sliding his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck. “If she had such designs, I do not know. I only know that she will have to allow her master first rights to your attention and settle for waiting for the proper hour.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t believe Hoof sees it that way, sir. Nor am I to be her mistress, but rather the other way around. Let us simply hope that motherhood will distract her from that purpose for a time.”

“I am enjoying this time alone far too much, my dear,” Darcy told her then. “If I am to continue to behave as a fiancé, and not show you all of my heart, I must depart.”

“I would by no means prevent it, sir,” she pointed out, spreading her arms out so that he could see that she was not detaining him. “I have no hold upon you to keep you here.”

“Your hold on me is hardly physical in nature, madam, as well you know,” he scolded, and then he leaned in and planted a little kiss behind her ear. “I shall leave you now.”

# Chapter 18

On the day before their wedding Elizabeth and Darcy held a huge picnic on the grounds at Pemberley, to which they invited all of the tenants and many of the people who lived in or around the surrounding countryside, including several of the other estates throughout Derbyshire. Elizabeth was pleased to hold such an event, but she was looking forward to something else even more.

Unlike her disappointment upon the arrival of Miss Caroline Bingley, Elizabeth was all joyful smiles and delight when Mr. and Mrs. Collins arrived. She had learned during her stay in Hunsford to tolerate her cousin, and of course she was always cheered greatly by the presence of her particular friend. In this case, that circumstance was made happier still because Colonel Fitzwilliam had come along at the same time.

“Cousin Elizabeth, what a pleasure to see you on such a happy occasion,” said Mr. Collins as he came to greet her. “I shall love to catch up with you, of course, but first, I simply must go to greet your intended. I have a letter from Lady Catherine de Bourgh which she has entrusted me to set into his hands myself. If you will excuse me?”

“Certainly,” Elizabeth said, relieved that he did not wish to linger, for there were certain topics she did not think would be good to mention in front of him.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam? How did you come to arrive along with the Collinses?” she inquired.

“Though of course I came from the far north, and they from the south, we suffered the happy occasion of finding each other on the road up to the manor just now,” Fitz explained, just as jolly as ever. Elizabeth could not help but speculate that it must be difficult for the gentleman to come here when he had been so close to offering for her himself, and yet he seemed to endure it with a charm and grace that made her quite glad that he and Darcy were related, and she would thus always have an ability to be comfortable around him.

“It is good to see you again, in any case,” Elizabeth told him, shaking his hand when they stepped closer together. “I shall need another ally against the Bingley sisters.”

He chuckled. "Ah, I see you have already taken their measure."

"Quite," she agreed.

"I am sorry, Lizzy, that we were not able to convince Lady Catherine to allow Miss Anne to come along on our journey," said Charlotte with a frown of dismay as she stepped to her other side. "She was quite adamant that such a trip would tax her daughter greatly, but I am convinced she simply did not wish for her to bear witness to your wedding, which no doubt has been mentioned in her letter."

"It cannot be helped, I suppose," Elizabeth said, shrugging. "I do wish there was some way to release Anne from all her misery, but short of finding her a suitable marriage partner who would then take her away from Rosings, I cannot see how it might be accomplished."

"Would that I could assist her," Fitz agreed.

Elizabeth chuckled. "You, sir, would be her greatest possibility. Lady Catherine did seem most determined to keep Rosings, and her daughter, very much in the family. And I have heard it said that a gentleman in want of lands would be a perfect partner for her."

Fitz grimaced slightly as he glanced over at Darcy, who she saw was watching them intently from afar. "Forgive me, madam, for taking up so much of your time. I believe that Darcy's current look of thunder is an indicator that I should probably release you to his care and take my mingling elsewhere."

"Colonel, we are at a very public picnic, and you are to become my cousin tomorrow," she scoffed. "I see no harm in speaking with you yet a while."

He smiled. "The harm, madam, is in the matchmaking look I see lurking in your eyes. If you must know, my aunt is a most unreasonable woman, and she believes I conspired to help make a match between you and Darcy somehow – though I cannot say what gives her that impression, all things considered. If she ever becomes amenable to a match between myself and Anne, that would be another matter, but as it stands now you are wasting time and effort on such a cause, I can assure you. Please, enjoy the picnic, which is in your honor, and I shall go over and sample some of the wine."

“Fitz? What do you know of Darcy’s recently purchasing a small house in London?” she asked before he could move away from her, feeling guilty as soon as the words had left her mouth.

He raised an eyebrow and shrugged in a way that made her believe he knew a great deal in the matter but was not about to disclose any of it to her. “It is of no consequence, I’m sure. A simple business matter if I know my cousin. If you’ll excuse me now?”

“Yes,” she agreed reluctantly. “Yes, of course.”

“Lizzy?” asked Charlotte as he stepped away. “What are you talking about? What house?”

“It is nothing,” she assured her friend. “Come along and say hello to my sisters.”

The picnic celebration continued on around her. This was a huge gathering of people, both noble and common, who had come in from the nearby towns and estates to welcome Elizabeth to her new home. By all rights she ought to be enjoying herself, and she was, but for the nagging bit of doubt that Caroline had implanted within her mind.

How was she to know if one of these women here might not be the lady whose new house had been bought in Town? How was she to be sure any one of the women attending here who were increasing might not be the same lady that Mr. Hurst had seen with Darcy? And who might that increasing young woman be?

“I am being ridiculous,” she told herself as she counted about twelve pregnant females at the place and tried to match them up to their probable mates. “Even if such a woman exists Darcy would certainly not bring her here. I must desist in it.”

“Did you say something, my dear?” asked Darcy as he stepped over to stand beside Elizabeth.

“Only that there are so many people here, I do not know how I shall begin to sort them all out,” she replied. “As the Mistress of Pemberley, I shall certainly need to recognize the tenants, I suppose, yet learning more of the townsfolk or members of the other houses of importance is going to be quite the chore.”

He smiled. "You are quite suited to the task, I find. Anne would never have wished to make such an effort, and – well, had I ever been foolish enough to marry one of Bingley's sisters I should think every tenant would have suffered greatly from their inattentions."

Elizabeth giggled. "Mr. Darcy, you are quite terrible. I never would have thought you could tease a smile from me so readily when first I met you."

He leaned a bit closer to her ear. "That is because you were not so familiar with my humor yet. Tell me, are you pleased that I can cause you to laugh just as readily as the Colonel?"

She raised a brow at him. "Sir, you mistake me greatly. When I speak with your cousin, it is a light-spirited conversation between friends. But with you, it's – well, you know it is something else entirely, though we have yet to establish what that may be in full measure. However, I can assure you I look forward to finding out."

"As do I." He caught her hand and raised her knuckles to his lips, and Elizabeth gave a little, unexpected shiver at his response. The reaction only made his smile darken into something that settled somewhere in her gut, though in no way was it unpleasant. It did, however, remind her that they were not alone, but were in fact, surrounded by a multitude of people who would notice their exchange. She circumspectly stepped back from him a little, and Darcy cleared his throat as he let her go."

"I had it from your mother that the seamstress declared your gown to be ready for our little occasion," Darcy said as they began to walk down a little slope together.

"Oh yes, it is quite divine, sir," she said, nodding. "I am quite excited for you to see it."

"It is all I can think of, I assure you."

Elizabeth blushed. "Really? Then matters of business are not currently vexing you as much as they were last month? Such as whatever it was that brought you to London so unexpectedly at the precise moment when I told you my feelings where Jane was concerned?"

He shook his head. "That was an unfortunate business, I can



assure you. An old friend of mine died quite suddenly a few months before, but he had left a few – loose ends behind which needed to be dealt with. I was obliged to offer my assistance as a result. But it is a matter I am unable to talk about, my dear, and one which I would not wish to trouble our happy moment.”

“All right, then,” she agreed, smiling as she caught his hand and started tugging. “Come along, then. Let us forget all about everything and everyone else, and simply go circle the lake. I am aching to see how long I can make use of this ankle now that it is healed.”

“It is not fully healed,” Darcy reminded her.

“It is healed enough, sir,” she grumbled. “I am tired of treating it gently, and if I could, I would love to throw off all my caution and break into a run.”

“If that is your wish, my dear, I know just the field,” he replied, seeming to catch her mood. “But come, we must invite Jane and Bingley to come along.”

# Chapter 19

As they stood before the rector at the parish church in Lambton, Elizabeth was all smiles, but Darcy could tell how nervous she truly was. The gown she wore was an exquisite white satin brocade, but it paled in comparison to the beauty of his bride. And when he gave her their first kiss as her husband, he was certain he must be the happiest man alive.

His happiness was such that even the presence of the sour-faced Caroline Bingley could do little to alter it. He was fully aware that she had always hoped to become Mistress of Pemberley. It had, in fact, been the main reason why he had never discouraged Lady Catherine's notions of his supposed betrothal – if Caroline had thought she had hope her overtures towards him would have likely become quite unbearable.

Now, though, she at least attempted a civility she surely did not feel. And for that Darcy was grateful. He knew how deeply she could cut someone if she hoped to give them a wound.

But it was hardly the time to worry about Caroline Bingley and her nonsense, for he was far too happy to dwell on it. And thankfully, he had heard that she would soon be returning to London and would not attempt to remain for a visit beyond the wedding. A sensible plan, all things considered.

The villagers began to dance outside the doors of the church, holding up streamers and even carrying a pudding that they brought over to a waiting table. Though there would be a feast held at Pemberley itself, most of these folks would not wish to return all the way out to the manor today after having visited it just one day ago, so they held a small celebration in the square, and then Darcy and Elizabeth got into a private coach while the others followed at a leisurely pace somewhere behind them as they headed for home.

They held a formal dinner party which Darcy had insisted the other ladies must reside over, leaving Elizabeth free to simply enjoy herself, and from the looks of it she'd taken this to heart. It was difficult finding a chance to be at her side here and there throughout the hours of celebration, and yet whenever he might catch a glimpse of her, Elizabeth was laughing or smiling or talking with animation.

That was something about his wife he truly liked – her ability to enjoy herself in a room filled with people. His wife, he thought again with a contented sigh. At last.

Of course, he expected that none of his business associates, most of whom were among the revelers anyway, would make any attempt to discuss financial topics with him tonight, so he felt quite relaxed in his complaisance, expecting only to enjoy a pleasant afternoon.

That was until he spotted Sir Roland entering the grand parlor out of the corner of his eye. He groaned inwardly and angled his way over to the gentlemen with a growing trepidation.

“Sir Roland, I do hope you are here only in response to the invitation I sent you,” he said with a hopeful tone even though the pair stood side by side looking out at the crowd of people rather than facing each other as he spoke.

“I wish that were so, sir,” he said. “However, there has been a bit more of the usual trouble. My men have found her, but it is certain that those rooms which are meant to house her ought to be reinforced.”

“I purchased the house now,” Darcy pointed out. “Do what must be done, but in as humane a manner as possible. And please, I must have at least a little time with my bride before I am once again called into Town. If the situation is not dire, I shall trust you to handle it for me. Now, enough talk of this, my friend. Let us enjoy the party.”

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That evening, Darcy’s heart was in his throat as he approached the adjoining door at the back of his rooms, carrying a boxful of sweetmeats he thought his bride might enjoy, and rapped gently on the door.

“Come in,” Elizabeth called softly.

When he entered, she was sitting in her bed wearing a nightgown similar to the one beneath her robe the other night, no robe, but with

the covers tugged up and tucked under her chin as she watched him step through. Certainly, she would be nervous since this was sure to be the first time a man other than her father or a physician entered her bedroom, and it was highly unlikely that either of those other men had entered her room alone.

“How are you this evening, my dear?” he asked as he set the candy on the bedside table. Elizabeth eyed it with interest yet couldn’t seem to release the covers to take one for herself.

“You’ve no need to be nervous, Lizzy,” Darcy told her as he settled on the edge of the bed next to her. “Nothing will happen here tonight that is not of your choosing.”

She nodded, letting go with one hand to take a treat. “Are you trying to sweeten me up with this romantic offering, sir?”

“You are quite sweet enough already,” he assured her.

“Darcy, this tender side of yours never ceases to amaze me,” she told him with a little grin. “I do wonder, sir, what would you have planned to do over Season if you had not decided upon sending Hoof to steal my little book and ensured that I would agree to your proposals?”

Darcy laughed at her teasing. “My darling wife, you wound me. I’ll tell you precisely what I would have planned. To follow you wherever you went and continue making my entreaties until you accepted me, of course. But I am much happier with my dog helping me out than I would have been if you’d made me chase you longer.”

Elizabeth giggled. “I suppose I have led you a merry dance, Mr. Darcy, but I always know when it’s time to surrender. I believe now is probably the most fitting time of all.”

Darcy gulped. “You mean...”

“It is our wedding night, sir,” she pointed out. “What possible reason would we have to neglect that particular duty?”

His heart sped up, and he sucked in a deep breath to steady himself.

“No, no, you’re right. Of course. It’s just – it’s a silly romantic

notion, but I was hoping to win your heart.”

“Considering that I’m your wife, that’s perfectly understandable,” she said, her tone agreeable as she peeled off the blanket she’d been hiding behind.

“I’m going to do it, you know,” he added, nodding emphatically. “One of these days you’ll just wake up and realize you are madly in love with me.”

“I pray that you are right in it, sir,” she said as she moved into his arms. “Love would certainly make being a wife more enjoyable.”

His smile turned sly as he bent to kiss her. “Although, I suppose there are other remedies where that is concerned.”

He spent the next couple of hours proving his point while making sure there was no doubt in either of their minds that Elizabeth was now his wife.

And after, he had no interest at all in leaving her but stayed right where he was, holding her in his arms as they drifted off to sleep. Darcy silently made himself a promise. He would continue to love her with all his heart, and someday she would open up her heart and love him too.

## Chapter 20

Over the month that followed – a month that the Darcy household would have traditionally spent in Town but had opted not to – Elizabeth did her best to learn the names of every servant in their employ and every tenant surrounding her home. With Georgiana's help she was soon transformed into the true Mistress of Pemberley, and the two young women became fast friends during the process.

“It's been wonderful staying at Pemberley this spring instead of spending it at boarding school,” Georgiana admitted to her.

“Have you not graduated from there?” asked Elizabeth, cocking her head curiously as they walked along the field between Pemberley and the first tenant's house along the long, spread out rows of farmlands intent on visiting the family who lived there.

“I did,” she confirmed. “But that doesn't mean it was originally intended that we should be at Pemberley for the summer. My brother is often expected to do more business in Town during the Season, but not long before he told me that he was to be married, he had me sent from our house in Town out here to Pemberley, stating that a year away from the place before my coming out might be just the thing. And now that you have come I can see the sense in it. That must have been his true plan all along.”

“You think he sent you to Pemberley because he intended to make me an offer?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

“Yes, it does seem like him,” she insisted. “Especially knowing that our aunt would not be amused. He would certainly not want to get me involved in any of that. And I can only imagine all the tongues wagging in London right now. Don't you think it is much better for us to remain in Derbyshire, where you can accustom yourself to your new role and forge friendships with your tenants, rather than going into Town where all you'd get would be snide remarks from people who believe they are better than you?”

“I had thought that – well, that the new house your brother purchased in Town recently may have played a part in his decision to place his family all the way out here,” Elizabeth commented dryly.

“My brother bought another house in London?” she asked curiously. “Whatever for?”

“I have no notion if he did, or if the words were only coming from a young woman with reason to be bitter,” Elizabeth admitted, sighing deeply. “Georgiana, do you think that Miss Caroline Bingley would make up a story just to upset me, or have you found her to be mostly truthful?”

Her brow furrowed. “I have never known her to lie outright. What is this you’re talking about? Is it something that’s worried you the entire month?”

“I’m sorry, I should not have spoken of it,” she said, blushing. “Things between your brother and I have been wonderful, and I should have dismissed her words by now. It’s just – I cannot seem to fault her logic.”

“Tell me everything this instant, Lizzy,” Georgiana encouraged. “What is a sister for, if not to keep confidences?”

Elizabeth giggled despite her melancholy. “Do you – do you believe that your brother would keep a mistress in Town?”

Georgiana’s face fell, but then she instantly laughed at the thought. “My brother would do nothing of the sort. He is an honorable man. And besides –” She hesitated, then blushed.

“Besides, what?”

“Well, if he was going to keep a mistress, why keep her so far from home? He spends most of his time at Pemberley, you know. Putting her in Town would certainly not be very – useful.”

Elizabeth laughed, and unaccountably felt a bit relieved. She said, “Well, then, at least I can be sure he’s not visiting the woman very often even if she does exist. That’s something, at least.”

“It was cruel of Caroline to mention such a person in any case, especially given the fact that your marriage to my brother was – well, not exactly of your choosing.”

“No, Georgiana, have no fear in that. I have no misgivings in my choice of life partner,” Elizabeth assured her. “Darcy is a kind and

caring man, more than I could ever have hoped for. If I would have any complaint of him, it could only be this. Of course, I should dearly love to discover that the tale is false, for it was also mentioned that the young woman was great with child, and if he has indeed taken up with her, she must certainly be carrying a child that belongs to your brother. The whole idea makes me quite uncomfortable.”

“I wish that you or I could simply ask him about her,” said Georgiana with a sigh. “Some of the rules of society are so difficult, don’t you think?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, I certainly do. I find that being unsure if your husband is about to become a father with someone else is exceedingly vexing, to say the least.”

“Lizzy, I can only guess based on what I know, and my heart tells me that Will would never have a child with some mistress and keep her in a house in Town,” Georgiana insisted. “You have said it yourself; he has been kind and attentive, and he has more than once professed in front of me how very much he loves you. If this lady even exists at all, surely there must be some other explanation, for he would never wish to dishonor you in such a way.”

The talk with her sister-in-law at least made Elizabeth feel better for having someone she could speak with about it, yet clearly, nothing in the matter had truly been resolved. She told herself that she must simply trust in her husband’s words. He told her daily of his love for her, and she had begun to believe that her own ardor for him had grown a great deal since they had become intimate. In fact, it was probably the fact that she’d begun to realize a budding love for the man that she’d even spoken to Georgiana about the possibility of another woman at all. She did not wish to admit it, but the notion made her feel quite jealous.

But what brother would speak openly to his virginal sister about such a matter? Georgiana would see in Darcy only those traits which would be seemly for him to show her, and any more nefarious activities he might engage in would never be made known to her. He might easily have kept a woman for years without her knowledge, Elizabeth knew.

She tried to put all of it out of her mind, but later that same day, she entered Darcy’s study and he quickly stuffed some letter he was holding into his waistcoat, smiling awkwardly. “Have I neglected our



walk, my dear?" he asked her. "Perhaps we ought to see if Georgiana would like to come along. We could even have a picnic since the sun will remain in the sky a few more hours at least this afternoon."

She frowned as she stared at the bit of parchment still peeking out of his pocket. "Is there something amiss, sir? The letter?"

Darcy shook his head, pushing it deeper into the pocket. "No, not precisely, my dearest Lizzy. You must trust that you shall always have my heart, but – there are certain circumstances which I cannot discuss, even with you. Secrets that are simply not mine to tell. Can you understand and forgive me for that?"

"I have little choice in the matter, sir," she pointed out. "As your wife, it is my duty to follow your orders and to accept whatever decisions you make without complaint. Such is a woman's lot in life."

Smiling, Darcy rose and came to tug her into his arms. "And it is the duty of a husband to ensure the happiness of his wife. And though these matters might draw me back into Town sooner than I would have liked, be assured that my heart shall remain right here with you and Georgiana the entire time."

Both Elizabeth and Darcy soon returned to the parlor in search of Georgiana, but when they arrived the butler stepped in to deliver the day's post on a silver salver. Elizabeth received a letter from her sister, Jane.

"Oh, Darcy, you'll never believe it! Jane and Bingley are engaged at last! They intend to marry at Netherfield sometime after the heat of the summer has passed. I cannot wait! I have longed for Jane's happiness, and at last it seems to have arrived!" She turned around then to see that Darcy was reading another letter, and the frown on his face told her that something was terribly wrong. "Sir? What is it?"

He shook his head and gave a laugh of irony. "It is to do with that little matter we could not talk about just now, and matters are far worse than they were in that missive. I am sorry, Lizzy, but I must return to London at once. Perhaps if I address the trouble myself instead of leaving it in the hands of my solicitor, I will be able to settle the entire issue, though I am quite certain I cannot. It is an ongoing difficulty, I fear. I hate to spoil the plan for a picnic we'd just devised, however. Why don't you and Georgiana go out to the lake with a basket and enjoy the afternoon together?"

“Are you certain you must go, Darcy?”

“Yes, it must be me,” he insisted. “But I will try to return to Pemberley as soon as possible.”

# Chapter 21

By the end of the summer Darcy had been called away to London not just once, but thrice. Elizabeth tried very hard to understand and accept that there was simply something going on of which she could not be a part, but his absences weighed heavily upon her. However supportive she might wish to appear, she worried that whatever secret he was keeping might be a threat to the happiness they were trying to build together.

Summer's conclusion was upon them, and with it the joyous invitation to Jane's wedding that they had been waiting for. Darcy, Elizabeth, and Georgiana set off in a carriage ride together which would take three days, for they were in no great hurry to get to Meryton.

"I am most pleased that your mother was not insulted in our desire to settle our household at Netherfield rather than making an attempt to invade the much smaller accommodations she would have to offer us at Longbourn," said Darcy as Elizabeth read him the letter she'd received upon their arrival at the last inn they'd use before continuing onward the next morning.

"It was only sensible, sir, to make such a call," Elizabeth agreed. "Though Mama does go on to say that they wish for us to first stop at Longbourn, where she has arranged to hold a small celebration dinner for the happy couple. Apparently, rooms for Jane have also been arranged for at Netherfield already, and she will be continuing on with us to her new home to await the final three days there before her nuptials as well. It is understandable, of course, for with Jane out of the bedroom we once shared Mama will be able to offer it for the use of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, whose children will be taking Mary's room while she spends those days rooming in with Kitty and Lydia. Such a great tussle. I can only imagine how awfully difficult sleeping arrangements might have been if we had held our own wedding at Longbourn!"

Darcy laughed, though Georgiana did not get the joke. "Is it that small, then?"

"It is about the size of our dining hall, perhaps with the antechamber as well," Darcy explained to her. "But it is a dear old

home, filled with memories of which I am fond. It was during one of Mrs. Bennet's dinner parties that I first realized that Lizzy may be a country Miss, but she was one who had stolen my heart."

Georgiana smiled. "Then I shall adore the place just as much, and enjoy the dinner more than any stately affair that may follow it. I can only hope that someday I, too, will forge memories so dear to my heart."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes, I believe I may well have a few cherished memories of the place myself. And we are approaching it now if you'd like your first look."

Georgiana declared the little house quaint, and they all passed a most enjoyable afternoon with her family. Mr. Bingley was there, of course, though thankfully his sisters were not, as they had elected to remain in Town until the day of the event itself.

"My sisters have each declared that with so many people already residing at Netherfield during the celebration, there would be little need for them to add to the party. Though for myself, I opine that they are still hoping I will call the whole thing off," said Mr. Bingley when Elizabeth was pouring him out a cup of tea, having somehow been given the pot as "the lady in the room with the most consequence."

"I hope that Miss Caroline is not being unpleasant towards you, sir," Elizabeth replied. "She certainly does seem to have a knack for it."

Bingley chuckled. "I have no doubt your good opinion of her has suffered, but I suppose she means well enough. But it's more than that, I believe. I have had it from Mr. Hurst that Caroline may have a young gentleman's interest, and as such does not wish to venture into the country until she absolutely must for fear of him finding another in her absence."

"Charles Bingley, it is quite horrid of you to speak of your sister like that when she has no means to defend herself," Georgiana scolded him.

Bingley agreed. "Yes, of course, I should behave myself. Though I am quite certain that my sisters are speaking of me in a similar manner even now. It seems to be the way between us, though we do also care for each other deeply."

There could be no arguing his observation, considering what Elizabeth knew of the sisters involved, and so she simply smiled and shook her head. “And yet Georgiana is right. We have far too much to be happy about to consider anything else right now. Shall we not soon be on our way to Netherfield? I adore my family, but I would also adore a good night of rest.”

“Indeed, we shall,” he agreed. “Watkins is loading Jane’s trunk in the carriage now, and the rest of her belongings shall be moved in another few days after we have formally spoken our vows.”

It wasn’t until they were each placed in a room of their own at Netherfield that Elizabeth finally got a chance to spend time alone with Jane, and she was quite happy for it. Though she could not say there was something precisely wrong with her life now, she still wanted to speak with Jane about all Darcy’s secrecy and his numerous trips to London. She needed the opinion of somebody who did not know her husband quite so well.

She told her everything, ending with, “And even though I could wish otherwise, I greatly fear that there must be something to what Miss Caroline has told me. I am at least certain that Darcy bought the house, and the careful way that Fitz evaded speaking of it leads me to believe there’s more afoot than that he was willing to divulge.”

But Jane was having none of it. “Lizzy, don’t be a fool. We have learned all too well how much Caroline enjoys causing trouble, and besides, I cannot think that Darcy would have any reason to lie to you. If he tells you that his trips into London are related to an agreement he made prior to your marriage and have nothing to do with the relationship the two of you share, you ought to listen. I have seen how much the gentleman adores you.”

“I know I should. I trust him. I do,” she insisted. “It’s just that – well, it certainly seems suspicious in light of what Miss Caroline told me, that’s all.”

“Lizzy, you must listen to me,” Jane insisted. “I have been with Bingley several times when he has gotten letters from Darcy, and he has read them to me. Your husband speaks of no one else but you, and his words have left me convinced he is a man very much in love.”

“The last couple of times he came home, though, I have found

scratches on him,” Elizabeth admitted with a blush. “On his arms last time, and most recently on his hips. He tried to tell me they came from a playful dog, but I cannot be certain of it. What if Darcy has been going into town to see a woman, and it was she who left such marks? What if he has already fathered a child?”

“Nonsense. Caroline was only trying to drive a wedge between the two of you, just as she tried to do between me and her brother,” Jane insisted. “You should not allow yourself to be taken in by her.”

Elizabeth sighed and nodded. “Very well, Jane, you’re quite right. I shall do my best to forget all about it and just enjoy my time here with you.”

The following day, however, Darcy received yet another letter. As soon as he started to read it Elizabeth’s face fell, for she already knew he would depart yet another time.

“There are two days yet until the wedding,” he pointed out as he came back into the parlor after going upstairs to prepare for his journey. “And it does not take a day to go to London from here. If I leave straightaway, I should have plenty of time to deal with this bit of news and then make my way back here.”

“Darcy, I’ve had enough of it,” Elizabeth scolded him. “You simply must tell me what is going on or you shall completely break my heart.”

“Lizzy, come away,” he said, glancing at the others. “Let us walk the garden path, and I shall explain just a little. I cannot divulge the entire story, but perhaps just enough to allay your fears and doubts.”

She followed him outside, fully prepared to discover what was going on. Though he did tell her something more, she was sorely disappointed that he would not tell her everything once and for all.

“An old friend of mine died recently, leaving his family in great need of my help,” he explained. “I have been trying to settle matters for them all this time, but there are – certain troubles that are ongoing, and I have been unable to get them under control. But I swear to you, my darling, that I will do all in my power to settle these matters where they are concerned – tomorrow afternoon, if at all possible.”

“Very well, Darcy, I believe you,” she grumbled. “But for both our sakes, and the sake of our future happiness together, I certainly hope that you do.”

## Chapter 22

Elizabeth could have hoped that Darcy's return would happen before the Bingley sisters arrived, yet instead, they all arrived at the same time. Darcy had finished his business and then called upon Caroline at Bingley's residence in Town, only to discover that she was leaving with the Hursts the following morning. He decided to travel alongside their carriage on the way back to Hertfordshire.

On the one hand, Elizabeth dreaded giving Miss Caroline another chance to be alone with her lest she start to spin more tales of Darcy's misdeeds, yet on the other hand she almost welcomed it when the woman invited her for yet another walk. She almost told her no, except that her look of desperation was too difficult to resist.

"How has married life gone so far, Mrs. Darcy?" she asked after they had stepped out onto the small path that led towards the forest growing just inside the Netherfield gates at the back of the house.

"Most excellent, in fact," Elizabeth told her. "Darcy has done absolutely nothing to give me any reason for concern."

"I am glad to hear it, for I have been gravely fearful that the rumors of him keeping a mistress in Town are true, and you must simply accept the truth of it. Men like Darcy are seldom able to give one woman the entirety of their heart."

"You are mistaken in it, I'm sure," Elizabeth insisted, though she couldn't be certain of the conviction. Not when Darcy kept going to London and returning with scratches on his body. Not when even Darcy could not explain to her why he had purchased another house in Town, nor even begin to explain who exactly was being housed in it. She wasn't about to tell Caroline Bingley any of these things, but they still remained close to her heart like an annoying shroud.

"I am pleased to hear it," said Caroline, though her smile was tight. "After everything my brother-in-law has told me, not just concerning the one sighting, but another one only just this very afternoon, I was quite sure you would have been more upset now than you actually are. But then again, that is probably because you have yet to come into Town yourself. I worry that if you do, the gossiping there could prove too much for you. Perhaps it is best that your



husband has chosen to keep you as far from Town as possible.”

“I have never spent much time in Town at any rate,” Elizabeth told her, shrugging. “I shall not complain if I remain in the country, comfortably ensconced in the hugest house I’ve ever seen, for many months to come.”

She laughed. “Yes, Pemberley is quite large, is it not? And how are you faring at the running of it?”

“Quite well, thank you. It has been easy to take control of the place with such a wonderful housekeeper like Mrs. Reynolds to help me, and with the assistance of Miss Georgiana Darcy.”

“And Miss Georgiana is not resentful that you have taken the place meant for Anne?”

“No, not at all,” she denied it. “I have been told by Darcy, by Anne, and by Miss Georgiana that not one of them ever hoped for the union that Lady Catherine wished for.”

“But I do feel for Miss Anne, though,” Caroline added. “She is as sweet as she is sickly, and it will be difficult for her to find another gentleman to claim her now that her intended husband has left her behind.”

“If only she and Colonel Fitzwilliam would like each other,” said Elizabeth with a sigh. “He could claim her lands, and she could claim a pleasing gentleman who would treat her with all the care and kindness she deserves.”

“It has little to do with whether the two like each other, and much more to do with whether Lady Catherine thinks the son of a Viscount is a good match for her.”

“That makes little sense, though, if you think on it,” Elizabeth scoffed. “Darcy was good enough for her, and he holds no title at all. I shall never understand the perfidy of the peerage, Miss Bingley.”

“Even though I understand it, perhaps you are right in its sensibility,” she agreed. “But come, we are meant to be visiting with our sister, Jane, are we not? After all, she will be married to my brother tomorrow, and our families will be blended, so I might as well proclaim that she is my sister now and have done with it.”

“Indeed, yes,” Elizabeth agreed. In reality, she was pleased to see that Caroline was embracing the upcoming event rather than fighting against it as she had halfway expected she might do. Perhaps the woman was not as bad as she supposed, though she would pass no such judgment to that effect herself. This current sweetness of attitude was just what she had shown to Jane even as she was plotting against her the last time.

A few hours later Darcy arrived again at Netherfield. His expression was troubled, but he behaved in a most pleasant manner once he had bathed and returned to the parlor. Perhaps his demeanor suffered greatly when Lydia also entered the room, but he managed to maintain at least a detached yet pleasant smile as she spoke.

“Oh, Mr. Bingley, it is so unfair that Mr. Wickham should have to miss two weddings in the same year, when my sisters and I have been such great friends with him. I cannot understand why no invitation was sent into Brighton, for I’m most certain that Colonel Forster would have gladly spared him for the occasion, especially since I’ve heard that he will be coming himself and bringing his dear wife Harriet as well.”

“Although I understand that Wickham is a merry companion, Lydia, I am quite certain that the safety and well-being of our country is far more important than whether you have a dance partner tomorrow,” Elizabeth scolded her.

“Nonsense, I know very well that Mr. Bingley has not invited him because of Mr. Darcy,” she complained, frowning over at her brother-in-law. “But this party is not yours, sir, and nor is the household.”

Darcy snorted softly. “Madam, if Bingley has not invited the gentleman, it shows good sense, but I assure you I played not part in the decision.”

“But it was likely done to please you, all the same,” she complained.

“Of that, I’m certain,” he agreed. “Yet, I will show no remorse in it, and would prefer not to discuss the gentleman further, if you please. I came here to enjoy this wedding.”

“Oh! Lizzy, I cannot see how you get on with the man,” she

wailed, running toward the door in a most dramatic manner.

“I’m sorry, Darcy,” she told him after the door slammed.

“Do not worry, my dear, I understand very well how she must feel,” Darcy said, giving Elizabeth’s hand a squeeze. “Yet, I have not seen you for over a day. Can we hide ourselves away for the rest of the evening and leave the socializing to the Bingley siblings?”

Elizabeth smiled. “I will not protest it, sir. I missed you so much yesterday.”

“I’m glad to hear it, my darling Lizzy,” said Darcy, and his own smile left Elizabeth feeling dazzled by its brilliance as she got to her feet and took his hand.

“Good night, everybody,” she said to all the remaining Bennets and Bingleys who were currently still seated throughout the parlor, most acting very much as though nothing untoward had just happened. “We shall see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Lizzy, good night, Darcy,” they chorused cheerfully.

## Chapter 23

After all the tension between Darcy and his wife, and all the tension caused by the situation he was dealing with in London, it was pleasant to simply spend time alone with Elizabeth and to awaken the next morning wrapped in her arms. It was precisely how Darcy wanted to awaken every morning for the rest of their lives, and he whispered as much in her ear before spending yet another hour proving the words before they were obligated to arise and dress for the wedding.

Darcy was somewhat amazed that Caroline had not taken any opportunity to single him out so she could complain about her brother's choice, and he believed it was because she was still upset that he had married Elizabeth. He worried that her jealousy might yet cause trouble when she approached Elizabeth and said something into her ear instead.

What could Caroline possibly have to say to Elizabeth that everyone need not hear? Certainly, his wife had not told him of any change in her affections for Bingley's sister, but had, upon their last discussion, been worried about whether she might act out in some way toward her. He didn't know what Caroline was about, but his instincts told him it was not something good.

His mood was not much improved when he saw that Colonel Forster had brought along ten of his men to the wedding, and one of them was George Wickham. Of course, the gentleman was on his best behavior as he milled around among the guests. But Darcy was certain this was only because he must not have a particular heiress in mind there. Certainly, he had no interest in Caroline Bingley, and although he may find Lydia attractive, the less than sizeable dowry that came with her was sure to keep him from setting any real designs on her or any other Bennet girl.

"Mr. Darcy, I find that every Bennet is more lovely than the last," he commented with a wink. "Though I do not blame you for selecting the prettiest of them, sir. Intelligent, witty, charming to a fault. I have always quite admired Miss Elizabeth – or should I say, Mrs. Darcy?"

"You had better say it," Darcy grumbled. "Since she is my wife."

“Of course, sir, of course,” he agreed. “Which I’m sure has elevated the rest of the sisters in society’s eyes.”

“Though certainly not enough to interest you, sir,” Darcy scoffed. “If you will excuse me, sir, I find I have suddenly taken ill, and shall have to return to my rooms. Enjoy the party.”

“Yes, I shall,” Wickham agreed. “I have already found a most willing dance partner.”

Darcy cornered Bingley in the billiards room not long afterward, casting him a disgruntled glare.

“I am sorry, Darcy, but I could find no polite way to send Wickham packing unless I were to send all ten of Forster’s guests out the door, and then there would be very few dance partners for all the ladies assembled here,” he said before Darcy could even say a word. “I thought, there is not much harm he might do while he is here. Even if Lydia is foolish enough to like him, he shall certainly have no true interest in her.”

Darcy laughed ironically. “I was thinking much the same. Yet my uneasiness has not been assuaged. I cannot stomach the gentleman, sir, and shall return to my rooms now. Congratulations again on your marriage.

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Even though he would have liked to remain at Netherfield longer than a week, the whole encounter with Wickham had really put Darcy off, despite the fact that he had soon returned to Brighton and was not even in the area. Besides, he reasoned, Bingley was newly married, and he had been married but a few months himself. Both couples would be far better off to spend their time with each other this year and leave the visiting for the next one.

Back at Pemberley, as fall colored the leaves and transformed their world, Darcy and Elizabeth remained in that crazy limbo, with him disappearing every week or so, and returning with a mood fouler than ever after each visit into Town. The longer it went on, the more upset the whole situation made him.

When he had promised his friend his assistance, he had known that maintaining the secret would be difficult, but he had never thought that it would be quite so difficult to keep it hidden from the prying eyes of the *ton*. The house he'd purchased had been located in one of the more secluded neighborhoods, and its neighbors were known for discretion, yet still somehow news that Darcy had bought it had spread quickly, and what most people were saying about it was far less than desirable. Even still, if only one of that house's occupants was not quite so vocal, it was certain that the gossip would have quickly died down, leaving the occupants to quietly continue onward toward their goals.

Most frustrating of all, though, was the fact that because of the promise exacted by his friend, he could not share anything about these issues with his wife, the one person he most wanted to become close to, and he feared that the lack of communication was driving the two of them apart.

One evening, when he was sitting alone in his study, Elizabeth had clearly had enough. She knocked on his door and entered, her face molded into a mask of indifference as she spoke.

"Sir, as you have become less than amiable of late, and as I find myself in need of better company to buoy my spirits, I have invited my sisters and Charlotte to visit Pemberley along with any husbands who might wish to join them. And my co-conspirator, Georgiana, has invited along Colonel Fitzwilliam. I expect that you will have no objections to such a plan?"

"If it pleases you, my dear, you must certainly do as you like," he replied woodenly. He hated that his wife and his sister would plan such a visit without his input, but it wasn't as though he had made himself available for them to talk to. Darcy knew that he needed to pull himself up out of his melancholy, he just couldn't figure out how.

Perhaps a visit from Elizabeth's sisters might be exactly the remedy that he needed as well, particularly if Fitz decided to come along. Unlike everyone else in his life, his cousin knew precisely what Darcy was going through. He had been with him when all the trouble started, and he was sworn to secrecy about the matter as well. A good talk with someone who knew exactly what he was going through might help him figure out what to do.

Darcy realized that he needed to stop hiding himself away in his study and spend some time in company, so he soon emerged from his cave and settled in the parlor, doing his best to smile at the two women.

“So, when is this visit to take place?” he asked them in the most enthusiastic tone he could muster.

“Next week the guests shall begin to arrive,” said Elizabeth. “Though, of course, Jane and Bingley declined the offer, much preferring to enjoy their first months of marriage at home.”

“Yes. Yes, of course they would,” said Darcy with a nod.

“However, Mama was more than happy to send the girls along, and even stated that we could have them all winter if we wanted them,” Elizabeth added, rolling her eyes and smiling. “We won’t, of course. Lydia is far too wild to keep quite so long, I find.”

“Indeed, yes,” Darcy agreed. “In that, I couldn’t agree with you more.”

# Chapter 24

Throughout the week, while they waited for their guests, Darcy tried his best to appear sociable, but Elizabeth's concern could only grow as she witnessed it. What secret could Darcy possibly be guarding so fiercely? And if Miss Caroline's tales were true, and that woman Mr. Hurst had seen was increasing, how much longer could it possibly be before her confinement? She must certainly be close, if the child had not already been born.

She hated the idea that Darcy might have a small child already born somewhere in Town, but what she hated even more was the idea that a father would be kept from his child simply because he was married to one woman but wished he could be with the other. Such a circumstance seemed completely intolerable.

But at the same time, Elizabeth now had come to realize that she did, in fact, love her husband beyond all measure, just as he had wished for her to do. And because she loved him, she wanted to keep him close, but she couldn't stand to be the cause of his pain in doing so. Perhaps she ought to tell him to go to his child and its mother, but if she did so, it would tear her apart to watch him go.

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"Colonel Fitzwilliam, I didn't know if you would come," said Elizabeth as he bent before her and lifted her hand to his lips. "Georgiana knows you better than I thought."

Fitz laughed and shook his head. "So, Mrs. Darcy, I believe my own powers of understanding to be quite keen. Darcy is hiding in his study away from his guests, and you've got the look of a woman harboring a great deal of stress. You could use a good walk around the lake, I believe."

Elizabeth gave an ironic little laugh. "Yes, I believe you're right. Usually it is something that Darcy and I undertake together, but it seems the only thing that draws him out of his study is the arrival of the post each day, and then he takes any letter he has received and



disappears again. Ever since my sisters and Mrs. Collins arrived, he has not even made any attempts at civility, despite the fact that when I first mentioned that I'd invited them, it seemed to draw him out for a couple of days before he disappeared once more. I really don't know what I can do to help."

"I admit, I understand my cousin more than you in this," said Fitz. "He was quite devoted to a man who suddenly died, and I suspect that man's death has left him with – scars, I suppose."

"Scars and other issues," Elizabeth agreed. "Such as apparently purchasing a house for them, among other things."

"What do you know about that?" he asked as they stepped closer to the path that circled the lake, but then he paused and looked down at her. "What has Darcy told you?"

"Only that when his friend died, he took on the responsibility of protecting his family, though I know nothing of that family. Who they are and why they need his protection are two issues he holds as absolutely secret, sir."

Fitz shook his head, hearing this. "If he has not divulged the secret to you, it is certain that matters have not yet been properly settled where that family is concerned. I wonder that the issue is taking so long and has got Darcy this upset, though. The gentleman in question was a widower with two daughters nearly grown. Neither of them had secured a husband – one because she was considered unworthy, and the other – well, as I said, the story is not mine to tell."

Elizabeth hesitated, but she had to ask. "Sir, was either of those young women increasing?"

Fitz stared at her, clearly uncertain how to answer, but he soon made a decision, saying, "Yes, I believe so. Though I do not know any of the particulars in the matter. But how would you come to know that?"

Elizabeth blushed and shook her head. She tugged a letter from the folds of her walking gown and set it into the colonel's hands. Miss Bingley and sent it to her not a week ago and told her that upon Darcy's most recent visit into London that she had witnessed him together with an increasing young woman with her own eyes, and the lady looked like her confinement must arrive very soon.

The colonel read through and then looked up at Elizabeth with a heavy frown. "Miss Caroline Bingley speaks of friendship but spews a poison that surely must be hurting your heart, madam," he said with a frown. "Surely, she could only have seen my cousin assisting the young woman of which we speak, but I can assure you that Darcy has not interfered with this woman himself. He looks upon her much as he might a niece or a sister. But I can tell you nothing more. I cannot divulge to you what your husband will not. Darcy and I are closer than brothers, and it would be a betrayal."

"I understand," Elizabeth said, nodding as she tucked the letter into her bodice again.

"It's not my place to say this, either, but you're my cousin now so I'm going to," he added as they began to walk again. "Don't shut Darcy from your heart, and don't keep these worries hidden. Tell him about that letter. About all the accusations that Miss Bingley has leveled against him. The two of you need to talk about this; perhaps if he knew how much his secrets are hurting you, he might open up and bring you into the inner circle. You're his wife, Lizzy. He wants to trust you and have your trust. This secret isn't important enough to ruin the rest of your lives."

"Will you talk to him, Fitz? Will you try to convince him that he doesn't need to hide from me? Surely a wife can know the secrets of her husband since she has sworn her loyalty to him. If he were to entrust me with these truths he holds so close to his heart, I would never share them with anyone else."

Before they could discuss the matter any further, they turned to the sound of Darcy himself calling out to them. "Fitz? I hadn't heard that you'd arrived, yet I saw the two of you standing here while looking out my study window just now. I see that you have obviously encountered my wife."

Fitz smiled. "I have, indeed, Darcy. I'd only just arrived, and she was already headed outside for a walk, so I simply accompanied her. As she is now my cousin, I saw no harm in joining her."

"What news from the north?" Darcy inquired.

"The best possible news, sir," said Fitz, smiling. "I have asked for the hand of a particular young woman, and she has agreed. Very soon,

the two of us will be married.”

“That is excellent news, my friend,” Darcy exclaimed. “Do I know the lucky girl?”

“Indeed, you do, sir,” he replied. “However, I have not yet spoken with her family, so it is unwise to say anything else now.”

Darcy cocked his head at his cousin. “Perhaps if we were to speak in my study, you might explain yourself a little better?”

“Perhaps,” Fitz agreed. But then the sudden sound of loud barking filled the air, and the next thing they all knew they were being accosted by a horse-sized dog. “Hoof, what are you doing out here? Darcy, shouldn’t she be kept in? We don’t want her to birth those pups somewhere other than the kennel.”

“She must have escaped again,” he said. “Not to worry, she shouldn’t be ready to have them for a while yet. Come along and help me get her back to safety, won’t you?”

“Of course, cousin,” Fitz agreed. He winked at Elizabeth before adding, “There were a few things I wanted to talk about with you anyway.”

Elizabeth smiled as she watched them go, but she wasn’t nearly as happy as she appeared. Darcy had come out of his study, yes, but he hadn’t spoken to her. He hadn’t even looked at her, really. She didn’t understand why, but it hurt. It hurt that he was willing to come out and greet his cousin in such a friendly manner but hadn’t spoken more than a few words to her in days.

Sadness wrapped around her like a glove. She didn’t know what to think or who to believe. Caroline’s letter stated that she had, herself, seen Darcy at the side of a pregnant woman. She heard from Fitz that this woman was probably the daughter of Darcy’s deceased friend. But who may have fathered the child she was about to bear? Perhaps Darcy was simply hiding her, or perhaps there was something more.

Either way, what Darcy was doing to her was wrong. She was his wife, and he should not ignore her while she was standing right there in plain sight. One way or another, and whatever it might be, Darcy needed to tell her the truth.



## Chapter 25

After Hoof was once again secured in the kennels Darcy and Fitz soon headed back toward the house, but it soon became apparent to Darcy that his cousin was in no hurry to reach it. He stopped off in the middle of the field they were cutting across and cast him a stern look.

“Darcy, you know that I’ve always been a man who speaks his mind,” he began.

“Yes, sir, I know that quite well,” he agreed. “And it’s clear to me that you’ve got something you wish to say to me now.”

“Elizabeth told me that you have been hiding in your study for over a week,” he said. “When I said nothing against your marriage, it was with the expectation that you would cherish your wife as she deserves. Was I wrong in it, sir?”

“You were not,” Darcy insisted. “I love Elizabeth with all my heart, just as I did when I proposed to her a few days before you tried to impress her with your little poetry book. By the way, thank you for that. If Hoof hadn’t stolen that book I would have had my work cut out for me convincing her to be my bride.”

“If you loved her then, why did you not confess it to me when I spoke of my interest?” Fitz wanted to know.

“We were in front of Lady Catherine at the time,” Darcy reminded him.

“I fear that I must warn you, cousin, that Miss Bingley has been filling your wife’s head with a great deal of nonsense of late, and she is most upset by it,” Fitz told him then. “Am I right in thinking that your silence on a certain matter may be causing trouble between you?”

“What has Caroline been telling Lizzy?” Darcy demanded hotly.

“Only that you have been keeping company with a rather pregnant young woman whenever you have visited Town of late, and that you even purchased that lady a house at some point,” Fitz replied. “Would you care to shed light on it, sir?”

“It is only Miss Blythe. She fell in love with a young man and was compromised some months ago,” Darcy replied. “With her father dead and her in such a delicate condition, I had no notion how to help other than try to keep the situation hidden as her father asked of me. Yet I grow weary of my vigil, and the sister is – well, we ought not to think on that. She is simply not to be controlled. But I have no idea how to settle this situation, and I fear it is taking too great a toll on my marriage. I made that promise to Blythe well before I made a promise to Elizabeth, but I find that I am now regretting it.”

“How is Miss Blythe doing?” Fitz inquired. “I do hope all is well with her, and everything will turn out as she hoped.”

“She is quite well and shall soon be delivered of the child,” Darcy told him. “You know well enough that I cannot possibly leave her to her own devices at such a time. It is why I did not simply surrender the whole situation over to the solicitor – the young lady is far too emotional and requires the ear of a trusted friend.”

“I fully comprehend that situation, sir, but your wife is indeed worried about it,” Fitz continued. “She asked me to discover the secret or to at least determine what has put you in such a foul mood. I know it is not my place to ask, and the entire history pertaining to Miss Blythe is already known to me, but is there no way that you can comfort your wife without breaking your word?”

“I promised to say nothing of Miss Blythe or her circumstances to anyone, and the only reason you know of it was the fact that you were present when all of it occurred,” Darcy said with a heavy sigh. “How can I calm Lizzy’s worries without explaining that promise to her in greater detail? How can I comfort her without explaining who the young woman that Caroline Bingley told her about actually is? Miss Blythe’s true identity cannot become known until she is delivered of the child, as you well know. She does not want anyone to know the babe is hers.”

“Sir, I do not believe that the gossip from Miss Bingley is Elizabeth’s greatest worry,” Fitz told him. “She is only worried that things are not right between the two of you. If you but shed your discontent and present a happier face to her, she may feel a great deal of relief in it.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“For God’s sake, man, do something romantic for her,” he scolded. “Show her how much she means to you. If you love her as much as you profess, it should not be difficult. For starters, come out of the study and spend time with her and her guests. It’s not like you to neglect such a duty, sir.”

“Lydia goes on constantly about Mr. Wickham whenever I see her, asking me incessant questions about what he was like as a child and singing his praises,” Darcy grumbled. “I cannot stomach it, to tell you the truth. I fear the young lady is far too smitten with the rogue.”

Fitz laughed. “So that is the source of your distaste? I know you have great cause to dislike that particular gentleman.”

Darcy shook his head. “Nay, Lydia is not to blame. My discontent began before she ever arrived, I can assure you. I know that I have not lied to my wife; I told her I simply cannot divulge the reason for my trips to London. Yet, it still feels like I’ve betrayed her. It still feels as though I have greatly let her down because I did not entrust her with my secrets when I know full well that she would keep them. The sooner this business comes to its conclusion, the better. I do not want it to ruin the rest of my life.”

“Darcy, have you considered that the only reason Blythe asked you to keep this a secret was to prevent the whole of society from learning of it? Your wife does not run in the circles that Miss Blythe does and probably has no notion whatsoever who she is. And even if she did know, she is herself not prone to gossip and would never betray your trust to tell anyone else. What harm in telling her everything and ending all this trouble between you?”

“I believe you may be correct in it, Fitz,” Darcy agreed. “I know that Miss Blythe would surely understand if I explain everything to my wife.”

“Excellent choice, my friend,” Fitz agreed. “And if you like, I shall lend my own knowledge to the tale, for as you say, I was there to witness it myself.”

Even as the two men reached their conclusions, however, there was a sharp rapping on the door, and then the butler rushed into the room without even waiting for a response. “Forgive me, Master Darcy, but there’s a most urgent letter that has just arrived for you. I am

afraid it cannot wait even for a moment, sir.”

Alarmed, Darcy slid the paper from the salver and started to read.

“Fitz, I must make haste into London immediately,” said Darcy then. “It is Miss Blythe, and the doctor fears the worst. He has written that he will do everything in his power to save both mother and child but that we must be prepared for the worst. He is uncertain if even the mother will survive.”

“Allow me to come with you, sir,” Fitz offered.

“Nay, I must ride like the wind,” Darcy told him. “And you must keep Georgiana and Elizabeth calm. I pray you will wait and allow me to explain the entire situation to Elizabeth myself upon my return. As for my sister, she need never know what has transpired at all.”

“I shall endeavor to try, sir, though she was angry enough at your behavior as it is,” Fitz replied. “I hope that Miss Blythe and the child will be all right.”

“As do I,” Darcy agreed. “I must away immediately. Please convey my regrets at such a hasty departure to the others.”

“Of course,” the colonel agreed. “Godspeed, Darcy. Godspeed.”



## Chapter 26

Darcy hurried into the stables and ordered the hands to saddle up his fastest steed, then took off as soon as it was readied. He brought neither clothes nor even food, for he would be capable of procuring a meal or two along the road, and he could continue to wear his present outfit until the trouble had been dealt with in its entirety. He had no time to worry about such things until later.

In a carriage, especially if ladies were in it, such a journey might take him three days or more to accomplish, but he managed to cut it down dramatically to just under two, changing horses and dining at three different coaching inns, but taking no time to sleep at any of them. When he arrived at the house he had bought for Miss Blythe and her younger sister, he wondered if he had entered bedlam.

Miss Mary Blythe, the younger sister of Miss Helena, possessed such a tender constitution that the noises her sister must surely be making had her tearing at the walls, screaming even louder than any birthing woman might just to drown out the noise. Outside her bedroom door, two men guarded the exit so that she would not manage to get away again, but the greatest worry was that in her current state of upset she might hurt herself.

“How long has this been going on?” Darcy wanted to know.

“Half a day or more, sir,” one of the men explained. “We tried to dose her with some laudanum to calm her down, but short of pouring it down her throat by force, I cannot see how to get it into her, sir.”

“Do you have the draught ready?”

“We have it here, sir,” he said, nodding.

“Come along then, we cannot let this go on,” said Darcy with a frown. “I’m amazed the neighbors have not yet called in a constable.”

“Mr. Jennings was already pounding on the door,” said the other guard. “We told him the noise was coming from Miss Helena, on account of the baby being too difficult to push.”

“How is Miss Blythe doing?” Darcy wanted to know.

“She is not well, sir,” he explained. “The doctor has said that it’s unlikely that either she or the babe will last through the night.”

Darcy’s frown deepened. “One thing at a time. We must first subdue one before I may visit the other. Are you ready? We don’t want her to get past us like she has done before.”

“As ready as we can be, sir.”

“You two must hold her down, and I’ll be the one to pour,” said Darcy. “Now, open the door.”

They rushed through the door together in such a way that even if she were lying in wait, Mary would not be able to get out. One of the men captured her by the arms while the other secured the door again before he, too, helped to drag her over to her bed. Her fingers were covered in blood, and Darcy moved to examine the wounds.

“She’s been tearing at the walls again,” he said, holding back her hands as she grasped for his throat. “We’ll need to bind her to the bed until she has calmed down. Hold her still. Let me get the medicine into her.”

“Do not touch me!” Mary screamed frantically, but after a bit of a struggle Darcy managed to get at least half the bottle into her and she was now giggling hysterically instead of struggling with everyone.

“It will probably last a few hours, with any luck,” said Darcy as he turned away from the woman. “Whenever she passes out at last, the two of you must restrain her further. As for myself, I must check in on her sister. I worry greatly that we do not hear any noises coming from her rooms. I cannot help but fear the worst.”

Darcy hurried across the short hallway into Helena’s rooms, where he found that she was alive but resting, and she had not managed to birth her child. The doctor looked tiredly up at him, shaking his head.

“I believe the baby must be already gone,” he said. “Usually a child will assist in its birth, wriggling about and extending a shoulder or otherwise managing to get free. This one has not moved once since I got here, and that was over three days ago. I fear if Miss Blythe does not soon manage to push this child free, death may well take them

both.”

“Is there no way to help things along, sir?”

“There is, of course, the notion of performing a caesarian surgery, but in her weakened state I cannot say that the mother could handle such a drastic move.”

“And yet, how can we continue to leave her thus? She will only weaken further if we do nothing for her now.”

“You are quite right in it, Mr. Darcy,” he agreed. “I must recommend that we get the child free of her immediately. I will send for my nurse and have her bring all the implements we might need, including some ether so she will not wake while we are working. I believe it would be best, once we have begun, if you leave the room to wait. You cannot have gotten much sleep, sir. You may wish to bed down for a few hours if you can manage it. We will certainly know the fate of the mother by morning.”

“Indeed, yes,” Darcy agreed. “I already dosed Mary with some laudanum, and Helena will certainly not need me either. With all the stress I’ve been enduring, perhaps a draught for myself might well be the best prescription.”

“An excellent notion, sir,” the doctor agreed. “Would you deliver this note to one of your men so that he can fetch Mrs. Bell for me? And please, tell him they must hurry.”

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Darcy remained in London another three days after Helena’s surgery, but there was very little he could do for her that his hired men couldn’t do just as easily, and after hiring a nurse to care for both her and her sister, he knew it was time to return to Pemberley. And this time, he hoped that he wouldn’t be called upon to rush back to Town again anytime soon.

He was so exhausted when he got home that he headed straight upstairs for a nap, but quite soon after his sister came up and rapped on his door. “Brother, I can’t believe how cold you are, to completely

ignore your wife upon your return this way. Do you not love Lizzy anymore?"

"Of course I love my wife," he protested hotly.

"Well, then, I think I know of a way you can make amends, sir," she suggested, smiling down at him. "We've all worked quite hard to put together a puppet show for the servants this afternoon. Maybe you should come and watch it along with them."

"If I agree to it, will you allow me to sleep for a few hours now?"

Georgiana giggled. "It's not a lack of love you're feeling at all, is it? You're simply completely lacking in energy. Shall I go and tell Lizzy of your exhaustion, or would you rather leave her in turmoil?"

"You must certainly tell her that I will sleep now, and see her when I am human again," Darcy said with a yawn, closing his eyes another time as his sister wandered out.

## Chapter 27

Elizabeth was sitting in the parlor sometime later when Darcy stepped in and settled down in the chair next to hers. “Good afternoon, my darling. I hear that everyone is about to put on a puppet show, but I was too tired to learn the details. Please tell me I have not missed it as I slept.”

“Indeed you did not, sir, though it shall be commencing within the hour,” Elizabeth told him. “The servants have already been instructed to gather in the music hall, and that is where you also must go if you want to participate.”

“Lizzy, I know that you are upset with me,” he said, sighing. “I want to speak with you about everything that is going on, but not until after your entertainment is done, for if I upset you with anything I must say, I do not want it to affect your performance.”

Elizabeth scoffed at such a notion. “Sir, I can assure you that in my current mood, nothing you could tell me about your extra house in London will shock me.”

“Fitz tells me you had a letter from Miss Caroline Bingley,” Darcy added. “I should very much like to see it and discern precisely what I stand accused of. Though, in truth, you ought to have known that any letter you’d receive from that young woman could only be selfish in nature. Did I not warn you, my dear, that Caroline tends to go for blood if she believes she has been wronged?”

“And in what manner have I wronged her, sir? Did you have any designs on her that I was unaware of?” Elizabeth grumbled. “It is through no fault of mine if she desired a match with you that she could not attain. I should not be made to suffer for it.”

Darcy shook his head. “No, you should not. And I will certainly make that quite plain to her, I assure you. But please, might I read the letter?”

“You may,” she agreed, tugging it free of her bodice. Darcy’s eyes tracked her hand as she did so, making her blush. At least she could be certain that their physical closeness did not suffer any ill effects, if the flutter in her gut over his scrutiny could be believed.

He took the letter, but before he read it he captured the hand that delivered it in his own. "Lizzy, you must know that my heart is yours. No matter what poison you found in this, you must know how much I wholly and ardently love you – and only you. What I've been doing, I've done only in the service of a friend, and no more. The lady of which Miss Bingley speaks is but one of the daughters of the gentleman I spoke of before."

"The one who died, leaving his family in want of assistance?"

"The very same," he said, nodding. "It's more complex than that, of course, but as I said we can speak more on it after the show. I will by no means ruin the fun for our guests, nor their hostess."

Elizabeth nodded, then watched as Darcy read the letter over at least three times before he spoke. Shaking his head, he said, "It is just as I feared. Her sole intent is not friendly in nature, my love, though I'm certain that you have never considered her an ally."

"I do not, sir," she agreed. "But nor did I wish to make her my enemy. As it is now, I do not think that she is. It is mischief only that she hopes to cause, for whatever her reasons. I have doubted her conclusions, if not her disclosures, ever since they were uttered. For how could Mr. Hurst know with any clarity who the young woman you were with must be? And I am quite surprised that Miss Bingley, upon seeing the lady for herself, could not recognize someone who must run in similar circles to her own."

"I believe Miss Bingley and Miss Blythe are known to each other," Darcy supplied. "If she had truly gotten a look at her, she would have known her well enough. This tells me either that she did not see her, or she chose not to name her in this letter. And in either case, I can be grateful. You see, the lady in question is the daughter of a Viscount, titled in name only. She cannot allow her good name to be ruined publicly, so when her father died during her – well, her unfortunate difficulty – he begged me to keep her circumstances hidden from the public eye. Essentially, Miss Blythe is nothing more than my ward, but I cannot claim her openly right now."

"Why are you telling me this?" Elizabeth wanted to know.

"Miss Blythe has delivered the child and will soon be recovered," he said. "And, though it is most unfortunate news, she will have no

need to hide a baby. Her son did not manage to survive the birthing.”

“How sad,” Elizabeth said, frowning.

“There is more to the tale, but as I said, I do not wish to burden you with the full extent of this trouble until later. Can you forgive me for my recent reticence, my darling?”

Cocking her head to one side, Elizabeth replied, “Sir, you were already forgiven for doing what you must, it was your behavior while you were here that has greatly vexed me. When I first arrived at Pemberley we walked daily together. We talked for hours on end about all manner of subjects. We read books together in the evening, and at night – well, you know the rest. But all of it came crashing down with letter after letter, visit after visit. Sir, if this Miss Blythe must be your ward, as you suggest, then you ought to have brought her into the country, far from the prying eyes of someone like Miss Caroline Bingley.”

“That is – well, there are other matters which prevented it,” Darcy hedged. “Chief among them being the part of the tale you do not yet comprehend. But come, it is time to join the others. And I cannot wait to see what you have all come up with. I think it is an excellent idea to provide the staff such an entertainment. I’m glad you thought of it.”

Darcy wrapped his fingers around Elizabeth’s elbow as the pair of them left the parlor together, and she found herself leaning against him, happy in her assurances that he had neither fathered a child nor given his heart to someone else. Her smile as she rejoined her family could have lit the room, and Charlotte was quick to notice it.

“Oh, Lizzy, I see that you and Darcy have cleared the air,” she said excitedly. “I’m so glad!”

“Charlotte!” Elizabeth gasped.

“Mrs. Collins is correct, is she not?” Darcy defended her friend. “Our difficulty over the last couple of weeks has been too obvious not to be noticed. It is my fondest hope, madam, that all the trouble that has been plaguing us will soon be a thing of the past, once I have tied up just a few more loose ends.”

“Where have I heard that before?” asked Elizabeth, though her

tone was teasing. Now that she was certain of his regard again, she could more easily tolerate these 'loose ends' of his that kept appearing. At least, she thought she could until, in the middle of their show, the door to the music hall opened and a solitary figure, followed by an irate butler, stormed in to disrupt them unannounced.

"Stanton, what the devil?" Darcy grumbled. "You disappear for months – some very important months, at that – and then you suddenly burst into my home? What is the meaning of this, sir?"

The young gentleman seemed quite livid as he stepped forward, slapping Darcy across the face with his glove. "You killed my son, sir, and I will have satisfaction!"

"Pickard, you're here as well, I see," said Darcy tiredly. "What manner of nonsense has gotten into your insensible friend's head this time?"

"You will meet me at dawn, Darcy, and I'll hear of no other plan," Stanton insisted.

"Pickard, your friend is disturbing my family and their company," Darcy said, still in a calm voice. "Please remove him and yourself to the Horn and Cross Inn, in Lambton, where I shall send one of my men to discuss this matter with you directly."

Still fuming, Stanton allowed himself to be led away, but just barely. He kept casting irate glares at Darcy over his shoulder, and as he exited the door he called, "Dawn, Mr. Darcy. Do not forget it."

Elizabeth raised a brow as the two men disappeared from view. "One of those loose ends, I take it? I certainly hope, sir, that you do not intend to duel the gentleman."

"I will meet him, yes, but with no intention to fight," Darcy replied. "I will go there only to explain what happened and to discover why he was not protecting the mother himself."

"You said there was more to the tale, sir," she reminded him. "Now might be as good a time as any to reveal it all."

"Fitz? Come along with us to the study," Darcy called to his cousin. "I recall you stating that when the time came to explain, that you were going to help."





## Chapter 28

Elizabeth had given Darcy little choice in the matter, but since he wanted her to know everything he felt no qualms with excusing themselves from most of the guests and bringing Fitz along into his study. It was obvious to him that he need not make any further attempts at secrecy. Surely all of London must be aware of Miss Blythe's situation if young Stanton had come calling. Moreover, he clearly must have discovered that she'd birthed a baby boy, and that the child had not survived.

There could be only two ways such news had reached his ears. Either he had already learned of Helena's whereabouts, and he had come to the house looking for her and discovered what had occurred, or someone had spread the tale. Since Darcy trusted the men in his employ implicitly, he was certain none of them had said anything.

However, this left a few other options open. It could be the doctor or his nurse. It could be Mr. Hurst. Or perhaps it might even have been Miss Caroline Bingley. If she really had seen him helping Miss Blythe from her carriage but kept the woman's identity close, she might have chosen to strike at Darcy from another quarter. His wife had not been nearly as angry as she would have hoped, so she might have decided to try something else.

In any case, it didn't matter if Caroline had told Stanton or if he'd heard it from somewhere else. The fact remained that somehow he knew that the woman he'd abandoned had given birth, and now he thought he could show up here months later demanding satisfaction when in all reality, the whole situation was entirely his own fault.

"I need to talk sense into Stanton somehow," Darcy told his two companions. "I do not know why he left Miss Blythe to her own devices all those months ago, but for him to accuse me of having some sort of hand in the death of the child, when he is the one who left them in my care, is like more of a slap in my face even than his glove was."

"I fear he will not be reasoned with, sir," Elizabeth insisted. "I cannot begin to imagine the pain of losing your child."

"He had better have a good reason for leaving for the greater part

of a year after interfering with the lady,” Darcy grumbled. “For all intents and purposes, she is my ward. I was entrusted with her care, when he should have stayed and married her.”

“You know well enough what stopped him cold,” said Fitz with a heavy frown. “You must tell Elizabeth the whole tale.”

“Blythe’s other daughter, Mary, is prone to violent fits of anger,” Darcy disclosed. “In one such fit, she somehow got hold of a dagger and stabbed her father with it. When I received word that he needed me, Fitz and I were in Town already and hurried over. By the time we got there, the girls had run off. Helena was afraid for her sister, and she had guessed already about her own condition. Their father made me promise to find them and hide them, and – well, you know the rest. I purchased the house not so much for Helena as for Mary, who is a danger to herself and others and must be kept locked up. I am now able to surrender Miss Blythe’s care to Stanton’s, if he will do right by her, but still I am going to have to figure out what to do with Mary if the young pup won’t take over her care as well.”

“Darcy, I understand, but all of your speculations presuppose that Stanton does not shoot you,” Elizabeth pointed out. “And certainly, I do not wish to be made a widow just as I was coming to the point of feeling what you wanted of me.”

They both glanced at Fitz after the words had slipped out.

“Well then, I believe I have done my part here,” Fitz said with a knowing smile. “Perhaps I should give the two of you a chance to talk alone.”

“Fitz?” Elizabeth called after his retreating form. “Thanks for all your help.”

He smiled and gave the two of them a courtly bow. “It has been my greatest pleasure. And now, as Darcy’s obvious second, I’m off to see if I can prevent the whole encounter from ever occurring in the first place.”

Darcy was not at all surprised to learn that the duel was still scheduled when Fitz returned a few hours later. He had no doubt in his mind that both the seconds felt that the whole affair ought to be avoided, but since Stanton insisted he would not speak with Darcy and simply wanted to shoot him, there was nothing else to be done but to prepare his pistol.

Elizabeth had remained with him for quite some time, using the means only a wife might employ in order to convince him to stay home, but in the end Darcy was a man of honor. Though he had done nothing wrong, if Stanton insisted, he would just have to give him a mark to remember his foolishness. Certainly, Darcy would never aim to kill him – especially since he wanted him to marry Helena and have his own life get back to normal.

Was it a selfish desire? Perhaps, but one that Darcy was more than willing to own. Elizabeth was in her bedroom pretending at a sleep he knew she would never accomplish, and with only an hour until the sun would show itself, Darcy was out saddling one of his horses as Fitz was saddling his own.

## Chapter 29

“This whole duel is pointless,” Darcy told Stanton as soon as he arrived. “You abandoned Miss Blythe months ago with no explanation, and their father asked me on his deathbed to find and protect them, which is precisely what I have done. A job which I believe ought to have been yours, sir. Instead of accusing me of a wrong I had nothing to do with, why don’t you explain to me why you were gone?”

“I knew nothing of Helena’s condition, nor of her father’s death, because my own father had called me back home,” he told him. “He had learned of my interest in Miss Blythe and brought me back because he felt her pedigree was not up to snuff. For months I have pined for her, only to learn when I went to their home that her brother has taken charge and the sisters have been missing for quite some time, hiding because of the nature of the father’s demise.”

“If you know all that, then why the desire to fight?” Fitz interjected.

“It is a matter of honor, sir,” Stanton insisted. “Darcy was there when my son was born. He should have done something about it. He should have – I don’t know – helped? Made sure she took care of herself? This pain is eating me up, and I must do something to stop it.”

“I have not come here to fight, sir, but to talk,” Darcy insisted. “When I was told to come quickly into Town, my messenger made it clear that something was quite wrong, and upon my arrival the doctor had remained with Helena for days already, yet she could not deliver the child, which had gone still. If not for my suggestion to do a surgery to remove him, your Helena would have been dead right alongside the boy.”

“Why did no one tell me this?” Stanton demanded hotly.

“You should be grateful that she still lives,” Darcy insisted.

“She lives, yes, but she has lived under your protection all this time,” Stanton said, his ire increasing another time. “What have you asked of her in return, sir?”

“For God’s sake, man, I’ve just married the love of my life,” Darcy protested, his own temper now rising. “What need would I have for a spare?”

“Oh!” Stanton groaned angrily and accidentally fired his weapon. The bullet hit Darcy’s arm, and in retaliation, he raised his own pistol and shot Stanton’s arm, effectively making him drop his gun as he gasped in pain.

Fitz and Pickard cast each other looks of alarm, and the surgeon they’d brought along quickly came forward to look the two wounds over, starting with Stanton’s.

“Just a scratch, sir,” he said, pouring alcohol on it. “It should heal with a dressing. Please remove your shirt while I have a look at your opponent, and I’ll attend to it in a moment.”

Fitz and Pickard both came to stand by Stanton.

Fitz said, “Do you see that it was just as I told you? I had no chance to learn the particulars of the birth from my friend, else I would have told you that as well. Darcy is right, you should be grateful that Miss Blythe did not die. And equally grateful that Darcy did not put that bullet someplace much worse. You must give over this senselessness and begin to think rationally.”

“Yes, it is as I said,” Pickard agreed. “You are alive, and so is your beloved. You must go and marry the girl, and together the two of you will be able to produce another child.”

“You are quite right in it,” Stanton admitted with a defeated sigh. “But at least the pain in my arm has lessened the anger in my heart. Mr. Darcy, I thank you for taking care of this situation, but I must ask you what has become of Mary? Has anything been done to ensure she won’t stab anyone else?”

“Not enough has been done, I fear,” Darcy told him as he, too, removed his shirt so the surgeon could get a better look at his arm. “Helena has been most stubborn where her sister is concerned.”

“The bullet passed clean through, sir, but I’ll need to close the entry and exit wounds.”

“Deal with Stanton’s dressing first, then,” Darcy suggested. “Mine will take much more time, and a heavy dose of that laudanum wine.”

“I believe some of it must also go to Stanton, here, as well,” the man replied.

“I’m not sure we should alter my friend’s faculties with too much of that stuff,” Pickard commented dryly. “He’s been drinking himself into oblivion for the greater part of last night, and only some very strong doses of coffee brought him around enough to stand up straight when we got here. Frankly, Darcy, I believe you’re lucky to be alive. It would have needed but a slight stagger to the side.”

Darcy grimaced. “Yes, well, I believe fate must finally be on my side. Stanton, when you’ve sobered up a bit and are able to ride, I will want you to go to my solicitor and have him bring you to the house where Helena and Mary reside. My men there will inform you of everything once you provide them a letter from me, which I fear I’ll have to have my cousin write.”

“If Mary has grown so poorly in temperament, we must surely find a safer place for her,” Stanton said with a sigh. “Helena will not like it, but –”

“The house can be modified, and a caregiver skilled in such matters was already recently provided. The real issue is Helena herself. She may not wish to leave her sister’s side,” Darcy told him. “I will give you the deed to the place, even put it completely into Mary’s name if you’d like.”

“I had it in mind to defy my father and marry my Helena, but I’m not at all sure he won’t cut me off as a result. As the fourth son, I already have a living, of course, but if he removes his support, we may well be forced to live in the house you provide, as he’ll likely revoke my privilege to the ancestral home. And for a certainty, he will never welcome my wife.”

Fitz said, “It sounds as though you’ve already given thought to your plans ahead of time.”

The surgeon had finished bandaging Stanton’s arm, and he now rolled his shoulder around a couple of times before reaching for his shirt. Pickard helped him to put it on.

“I have done,” he said, nodding. “The bank I work for shall certainly provide for everything we’d need, and after all we’ve gone through, I do not believe that society will look as favorably on Helena as they once had done, so for the very immediate future, I don’t expect to attend many parties or receive many invitations. There’s no knowing if we will ever again be invited into polite households.”

“You shall be welcome to visit mine, Stanton, though I do not think we could safely invite Mary. She must remain safely at home, where she will hurt no one else. And I would say we out to soften up the walls in her bedroom. She has been attempting to scratch her way through the walls. I was too exhausted when I left there yesterday to bring it up, but since you are taking over the task after tonight, I believe it must fall to you now.”

“Mr. Darcy, if you will end your conversation for the time, I believe you will not be able to continue to speak while you are gritting your teeth.”

Darcy grimaced. “Yes, quite right, doctor. Stanton, Pickard, you must return to Pemberley with your belongings sometime tomorrow, and we can discuss all of this further as we both recover. At least three days should be enough for your wound, Stanton, though it will surely be a bit longer for mine.”

“Drink this, sir,” said the surgeon. “I can surely drive you back to Pemberley myself if it leaves you out of your mind.”

Darcy drank down the remains of the bottle and then bid Stanton and Pickard farewell as they mounted and headed back for their hotel. Fitz, of course, remained behind to help in any manner the surgeon might require. When Darcy was patched up, Fitz mounted his horse and led Darcy’s while Darcy laid down in the back of the coach, and they all headed for his home.



## Chapter 30

Elizabeth was worried sick as she waited for her husband to return. She had no idea what might have happened or if she would ever see Darcy alive again. Just because he'd gone to the duel with no intention of dueling did not mean that a duel would not occur. And worse, Georgiana was not foolish, and she had guessed easily enough where her foolish brother had gone.

For a time, it was just the two of them sitting together, and they remained mostly silent until suddenly Georgiana spoke. "Lizzy, I feel I must tell you what happened in Lambton yesterday while your sisters and I were shopping for hats."

"In the morning, yes?" Elizabeth asked tiredly.

"Indeed, yes," she said. "We ran into Mr. Wickham. It was – most alarming to see his manner with your sister, and I must warn you about him. You see, there was a time when Mr. Wickham tried to elope with me, but – well, I'm certain it was my inheritance he was after, rather than me."

Elizabeth gasped. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Wickham is quite the gambler and holds a great many debts, which I did not learn until my brother discovered my foolishness and warned me about it," she admitted, blushing. "I was fully ready to run away with Wickham, but I could not go without confessing my love to Will first. And it was then that I learned of the gentleman's true nature. Had I married him, he would have squandered away my fortune right away. Thankfully, my brother saved me from such a fate."

Shrugging, Elizabeth asked, "But what has any of that to do with my sister? If Wickham is a fortune hunter, he'll have no use for her."

"That was my own thought at first, yet –" Georgiana hesitated. "They seemed far too familiar with each other. I am quite certain that Lydia, at least, is madly in love. With Wickham, it is more difficult to tell, but he did seem quite attentive to her."

The pair were interrupted from any further discussion when

Elizabeth's sisters all came in en masse to wait with her in her parlor. Elizabeth sighed and rubbed at her temples, saying, "I suppose I can be grateful that Mama did not come along for this visit, if this is to be the outcome of it. She would certainly not have made my morning any easier today."

Mary, Kitty, Lydia, and Charlotte were the only guests that were still visiting Elizabeth as the autumn wore on, and though Jane had talked of a potential visit from her and Bingley in another week or two, that pair had not yet come to Pemberley since their wedding.

"If only Wickham could come to Pemberley," said Lydia with a heavy sigh. "He would certainly be able to cheer you, Lizzy, for the two of you always had much to say to each other, did you not? Did I tell you that I saw him in Lambton just yesterday? It was such a pleasant reunion."

"Forgive me, Lydia, if I do not share your enthusiasm for a reunion with the gentleman, and I'm sure there are others in the room with equal disinterest," Elizabeth grumbled, glancing over at Georgiana apologetically.

"Lydia, there are many reasons why Wickham is not allowed to come back to Pemberley, and you must not believe everything the gentleman tells you. He is not what he seems," Georgiana tried gently.

"You're just biased against him because of your brother," she insisted.

"I am biased against him of my own accord. He was – unkind to me in the past."

"I'll hear nothing more against him, I say," Lydia protested. "He is fun, and I want my own life to be fun. He's asked me to come into Lambton again this very afternoon, and I am determined to go. Though, of course, I must ask Kitty to come along with me to make it proper. It's so dreary that Wickham and I cannot simply meet alone."

Elizabeth gasped. "Goodness, what a scandalous thought, my dear sister."

"Of course, I shall not waste the sacrifice you made for us by marrying Darcy when you were compromised," she added. "I can see that things between you are quite strained. It must be such a trial to

be married to a man you do not love.”

Elizabeth blushed. “Lydia, you are quite wrong in it. Though I had not yet realized my love on the day we wed, it has certainly come into full flower now. I am forever grateful to Hoof for her playful interference.”

Georgiana laughed. “Yes, Hoof is a great trickster, I find.”

At that point, Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped into the room. Elizabeth sprang to her feet, her face filled with all the worry she had been keeping in check. “Where is my husband?”

“Off to his bed,” Fitz replied. “Not to worry, cousin, Darcy took a bullet in the arm, but it passed right through. The surgeon immediately dressed the wound but dosed him with laudanum and spirits to ward off the pain as he did so. I’m afraid the old boy is completely out cold and will have nothing to say if you should go to him now. Best to simply let him sleep.”

“It is most vexing that he even went at all,” Elizabeth complained. “A pox on Stanton and his friend, Pickard, I say. The gentlemen are lucky they are not here, or I should scold them both quite fiercely for bringing more trouble to my house at the very moment we’d cleared up everything.”

“Madam, I sincerely hope your attitude toward the two gentlemen might soon change,” Fitz added, wincing. “Darcy told them to come to Pemberley to stay for a few days, so they might better plan out what next to do about – well, that whole situation.”

“What’s there to talk about? Stanton should go claim Miss Blythe, I should think. It is their lack of a marriage that started the whole tragedy in the first place.”

“It is not Helena’s fate that concerns them, Lizzy, but the fate of her sister,” Fitz reminded her gently. Elizabeth comprehended fully what he meant and said nothing else.

Her sisters might have become aware of the plight of Miss Blythe, birthing and losing a child without benefit of marriage. But they knew nothing about Mary Blythe or what she had done to her father. It was a frightening thought that a woman could become violent enough to do her father such harm, and Elizabeth had no notion why they hadn’t

sent her to an institution so she would have no further opportunity to act out. Yet, she could not mention such an opinion in present company.

But the fact that she had not been reined in thus made it clear to Elizabeth that it was likely Miss Blythe's desire not to have her sister locked away, else why would she have kept her hidden all this time? Surely the secrecy surrounding the past few months had much more to do with the violent sister than it did the pregnant one.

"I have not slept a wink all night," she decided. "Darcy may be asleep, but I shall go to him anyway. I must rest, and I'll do so much better if I do it by his side."

Elizabeth hurried upstairs and into Darcy's room, where she curled up with him on his bed and fell fast asleep, content in the knowledge that no matter what else might be going on, everything was right between them.

# Chapter 31

When Elizabeth opened her eyes a few hours later she found Darcy watching her, and he wore the most tender expression. She smiled warmly at him, then shook her head.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to get shot, sir,” she scolded gently.

“No, I said I was not going to fight,” he corrected her, smiling as well. “I’ve invited the young pup and his friend to stay here a few days until we can sort out all the details, but he has every intention of taking the problem over himself. I shall be completely free of it – though, of course, the young ladies are still the daughters of my friend, so I shall still care most deeply that they are doing well.”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth agreed. “I, too, wish that family well, for as long as Stanton does as he should, you’ll not be drawn into it another time. Thus, I wish them all the happiness in the world.”

Darcy sobered, and Elizabeth’s heart leapt. “What is it now, Darcy?”

“Lizzy, why did you not tell me about Caroline and her meddling?”

She blushed. “You seemed to be stressed enough already, and – well, if she was at all right in it and I confronted you, I did not think I could bear hearing that truth. Darcy, I believe my heart has been yours much longer than I was willing to admit to. It took Caroline’s foolishness to bring my true feelings into the light. Still, that does not mean I shall easily forgive her. Not when her meddling first harmed Jane’s happiness and then threatened to harm ours as well. If she was not related to Bingley, I should not mind seeing the back of her.”

“Nor I,” he admitted. “Though I have grown used to her antics over time.”

“I imagine you will go to London again to settle all this,” Elizabeth said with a sigh.

“Not unless I go by coach, and very slowly,” Darcy commented,

wincing as he glanced down at his arm, which was laid on the top of the blanket on a pillow. "A bullet through the arm does not allow a man to hold tight to his mount and canter all the way there."

Elizabeth giggled. "Sir, I should think not. But I do not think this time there is any need to do so, in any case. You shall dine in bed at least for tonight, I think. I'll send up one of the maids with a tray."

"But you, my dear, ought to go down and dine with the family," he told her. "I imagine that Stanton and Pickard have come by now; it would be quite rude to neglect so many guests under our roof. However, you may tell the men to come speak with me once the meal is over. I should be able to manage a few minutes of discussion before I'll want more laudanum."

Feeling peaceful in comparison to the last few months, Elizabeth hummed tunelessly as she headed down the stairs, but she soon stopped short as she heard a great cacophony coming out of the parlor. She then hurried inside to see what was the matter.

"Lizzy! Oh, Lizzy, there you are!" Georgiana exclaimed. "The most dreadful news has just reached my ears!"

"Georgiana? Whatever is the matter?"

"Kitty has returned to Pemberley alone," she exclaimed. "She went into Lambton with Lydia, just as they'd planned, but then somehow she got separated from them, and the pair were nowhere to be found. Upon further questioning, Fitz has learned that Kitty overheard Wickham yesterday saying how much he would dearly love to run away with her. Oh, Lizzy, we did not think he would marry her, but we gave no thought to whatever else the fiend might get up to."

"Surely Lydia must think he will marry her if she has gone off with him somewhere," Elizabeth insisted. "She would never go along with him for any other reason."

"Oh, Lizzy, I'm so sorry!" Kitty exclaimed. "I said nothing, thinking that one kiss in parting was perfectly harmless –"

"You saw them kissing?"

"Yesterday, while we were all in the milliner's shop," Kitty admitted, blushing. "Wickham tugged her behind one of the taller

shelves. When I scolded her about it, Lydia insisted that it was only a bit of flirting, but I should have known to tell you. I should have known better than to go with her into Lambton this morning alone.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, sighed, and turned around to face her newest. “Must some sort of scandal follow you wherever you go, Mr. Stanton? I do not know whether to scold you excessively for shooting my husband or thank you excessively because you are about to take over the situation in London.”

Stanton blushed. “I suppose I deserve a bit of each, though I would feel most uncomfortable receiving the praise so soon after committing the act which in your eyes must be unforgivable.”

“Forgive me for speaking plainly, but I find I cannot be cross with you when it is your very existence that brings me comfort right now,” she admitted. “A friend of mine was quite convinced my husband was housing your intended because she was his mistress. I am quite pleased to know that is not the case.”

“And by what means did she arrive at the notion?” Stanton asked, a bit irritated by the thought.

“Only by the means that I married the gentleman she’d been pining for over a great many years,” Elizabeth supplied, shrugging. “Do not worry, the lady has proven false more than once already, and anything she might say after this I shall deem less than trustworthy. I can assure you that Mr. Darcy and I enjoy a love match, and therefore he would not have any need for such an interaction elsewhere.”

“That is good to know,” he said, nodding. “But don’t you think we ought to be dealing with the matter of your sister?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Would that you had not been here to witness this. But how might this situation be worked on? If Wickham were to take Lydia to Gretna Green, he would probably lose his commission for disappearing from his regiment for such an extended time. If he were to take her into Brighton with him, it could not be until after he’d married her, but then he would need to figure out how to house her there. But with all the gambling debts he owes, how would he even manage to get her a room in a boarding house?”

“If Wickham’s sole aim continues to be money, there is one avenue that you have not thought about, Lizzy,” Fitz said then.

“Perhaps he means to extract funds from Darcy.”

Her eyes widened. “How might he do that?”

“If he compromises her, it does not follow that he must marry her if he is a less than honorable man,” he explained. “Darcy is a respected member of the gentry, and his reputation was already cast into question due to your hasty marriage, and probably the woman he bought the house for as well. It doesn’t matter that she was more like his ward than something more – scandalous. All they see is that he was housing the lady. And now, if your sister’s behavior comes to light, society will begin to believe Darcy is a most depraved being, allying himself with fallen women and behaving most inappropriately. Wickham might try to use that to his advantage.”

“Then too, how do we know that he hasn’t simply kidnapped the girl and plans to demand funds for her safe return?”

“He certainly would not be able to get that kind of money from Mr. Bennet,” said Charlotte, nodding her agreement. “Yet, he might easily get it from one of her elder sisters’ wealthy husbands.”

“He has no interest in getting it from Bingley,” Georgiana scoffed. “If he were to ask for money, it would only be from my brother. For some reason, he believes it is owed to him, and he will make every attempt to collect it. But I shall say nothing of what lengths he has gone to in the past.”

“Yes, that is something best left in the past,” Fitz agreed.

“Should we tell Darcy that the young lady has gone missing?” Stanton wondered.

“Not just yet,” Fitz replied. “I’ll send out a few men to look for Lydia, with the information of who she must be with and what likely reasons there must be for it. One I’ll send to Gretna directly, and others to London and Brighton to see if they can be found along the road. But Lizzy, it is impossible to send a man to every inn throughout the whole of England to see if they might have stopped somewhere. I fear that unless Wickham comes looking for money, there is not much hope of us ever finding them at all.”

“I greatly worry that my sister may be forever lost to me,” said Elizabeth tearfully. “Darcy asked me to send the men above to speak



with him after we eat, but perhaps you ought to go to him directly. I've had enough difficulty in my life thanks to hiding troublesome things from him. This one, he needs to learn directly. While my sisters are at Pemberley, he is responsible for them, after all."

## Chapter 32

It was decided that the injured gentlemen must stay behind, while Pickard and Colonel Fitzwilliam would help in the search, though of course, since Pickard had no idea what Lydia looked like, he was meant to be more of a backup for Fitzwilliam in case they found Wickham and he tried to give them any trouble.

“We must certainly search close by while we are at it,” Fitz said as he and Pickard set forth. “If I know Wickham, he will always take the most convenient path. Also, he has a special place in his heart for Pemberley, and there is a place that I should like to look in first.”

In the end, the colonel’s first instinct was the correct one. The pair were discovered in the old cabin that Darcy’s father had allowed Wickham’s mother to live in after her husband’s death until her own death just three years ago. Apparently, George had been continuing to make use of the place up until he’d attempted to elope with Georgiana, which was easily done because Pemberley was such a large estate, and the cabin was both in the forest and close to the main road.

As for Lydia, she confessed to her sisters that she and Wickham had been carrying on for months, ever since Jane had married Bingley. She explained, “I am not foolish. I know that Wickham cannot marry me with so little an inducement as two thousand pounds. But he loves me, as I love him, and being with him has been the greatest source of happiness. I am sorry, Kitty, that I gave you such a fright by sneaking off the way I did.”

“You must marry her, of course,” Darcy insisted when Wickham was brought up to his bed-chamber to explain himself. “I am not a fool either, sir, and I’ll not have myself made to look like one. How much blunt do you require to pay your debts and begin life as a married man?”

“I believe that sum must be quite large, sir.”

“I shall pay your debts off, and you may continue to make use of the cabin, but that is all you will receive from me yourself,” Darcy decided. “I shall also begin to give Lydia an allowance, but it shall be held in trust. You’ll not touch one penny of it, and if you are foolish

enough to start gambling again, I'll not help you another time."

Wickham's eyes gleamed. "Done, sir. And in case you are wondering, Lydia spoke the truth. I do love the girl – after my own fashion, of course. But fear not, I shall treat her with every kindness and civility, and I shall endeavor to keep my good name unsullied so it will not reflect poorly upon yours."

"We must start by summoning the Bennet parents to Pemberley, and then you shall call upon Mr. Bennet to ask for Lydia's hand properly. I will, of course, assure him that Lydia will not be forced to live only on your militia salary, sir, to make it easier for the man to agree to the wedding. And I will also provide Lydia's gown and fripperies. Knowing her, she will wish you to marry in your regimentals."

"One thing more," Wickham added. "I was thrown out of the militia. I will need to purchase a commission from the regulars, who are fortunately much closer to Pemberley than Brighton in any case. That should please my wife greatly, else she would spend much of her time in the cabin alone."

Waiting for a letter to reach Mr. Bennet and another to reach Bingley and Jane gave Darcy a few more days to heal before he was forced to emerge from his bed upon the day that both couples arrived. He had made no mention in either letter, penned for him by Fitz and Lizzy, of Lydia or any of her activities but said only that he dearly wished for the entire family to come together before the daughters were meant to return home for the winter. He simply didn't tell them that one of the daughters wouldn't be returning along with the others.

"Stanton, I've had a letter from Sir Roland," Darcy said as he stepped into the parlor and found him sitting there among the ladies. "I believe I will need to send you and Fitz up to Town to deal with the walls in Mary's rooms. She's nearly managed to put a hole in one of them and the last thing we need is for her to get out another time."

"Do not worry, Darcy, we are quite capable of handling the Blythe situation from here," Fitz said from across the room. "And, considering that you have other troubles to deal with at the moment, it seems a perfect time for me, Stanton, and Pickard to go into London and transfer everything over."

"And, of course, convince Helena to marry me after so many

months and so much sorrow has passed,” Stanton added. “I shall certainly be able to prove that my father caused our separation, but I should have sent her a letter. I should have easily been willing to ignore propriety for that after the liberties I had already taken.”

“I have sent a letter to Helena through Sir Roland already,” Darcy told him. “In it, I have already told her what happened to you and asked her to forgive you for it. I do not know if she will, but at least my words should make your attempts at an apology a little easier.”

“Very well, then,” Stanton agreed. “Pickard and I should not require much time to pack our things. What about you, Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“Sir, I am a military man,” he pointed out. “I tend to travel lightly. Besides, my room here tends to be used by me upon every visit, so I can easily leave behind those items which I do not currently need. I have but three weeks more before I am meant to return to my regiment, so if I do not return here immediately, those things may have to wait even longer. But I’m quite sure that Darcy will not mind it in the least.”

“Colonel, you spoke of a young woman you hoped to marry,” said Elizabeth, a light of curiosity upon her face. “Are we ever to learn her name?”

Fitz smiled. “This letter in my hand, which I did not even solicit, has already given me the answer I craved without the need even to ask first. I did not wish to give you hope, Lizzy, by telling you of the plans I was making with Anne. But it seems that Lady Catherine has just realized what most of us knew already. I am the perfect gentleman to take over the running of Rosings and to marry its lovely heiress.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open, and so did Darcy’s. They stared at each other, and both broke out into excited grins.

“Fitz, you’ve been holding out on me!” Darcy complained. “Did you not think that I would like to hear about this immediately?”

“The letter arrived but one hour ago, sir,” Fitz defended himself. “Lady Catherine has declared that I must spend the winter at Rosings, but she does not believe it will be necessary for me to give up my commission. If I do not, I am meant to return to the north in February

to begin training the new recruits, just as I have done every year for the past ten. And although she might object when I tell her the plan, she will not be able to stop me if I choose to bring Anne along with me because by that time, she will have already become my wife.”

Elizabeth said, “I believe that this marriage will be the start of a whole new life for Miss Anne, colonel. I pray that you will take as much time as you need to see it accomplished and perhaps bring your wife to Pemberley before you continue northward on your journey.”

“Stanton, Pickard, prepare yourselves. We shall take my coach, so have the servants stow your gear in it. We’ll leave at the top of the next hour.”

Just an hour after Fitz and the others had gone, two more coaches pulled into the courtyard, and all the remaining residents of Pemberley came rushing out to greet the Bennets and the Bingleys with joyful cries.

“Mr. Darcy!” called the kennel master before they could even step inside. “It’s your dog, sir, Hoof! She seems to have birthed her puppies last night!”

Elizabeth grasped his hand and chuckled. “Goodness. When it rains, it surely does pour. I have longed for the babies to arrive, sir, but there are other issues that still must be addressed first. I’m certain that Hoof can await our attention for just a few hours more.”

“Indeed,” he agreed and turned to lead everyone in.

Vouching for Wickham left a bad aftertaste in Darcy’s mouth, but he did it. Paying his debts and covering all the costs of the wedding was expensive, but he was glad to do it. Family had always been important to Darcy, but now that he was married to Elizabeth, he simply cared for a much larger one. He would ensure Lydia’s marriage, and then in the spring he would attempt to ensure Kitty’s and Mary’s as well.

It was his duty. It was his privilege. It was his honor to serve the people that his darling Elizabeth loved the most.

# Epilogue

Five years of marriage with the man she loved had made many changes in Elizabeth's life, but there were still quite a few things that remained the same. For one thing, Wickham had done little to change his evil ways and was killed in a duel with a man who was not happy that he'd been interfering with his wife. Lydia was now living in Town with Wickham's twins, Grace and George, and her new husband Mr. Allen James. Kitty was married to a gentleman from Kent and they had a daughter, Emily. And as for Mary, though it seemed she would never marry at all she had finally wed a barrister and moved to Dover.

All her sisters were meant to come to Pemberley to celebrate the birth of Jane's second child, a son this time. Little Charles was but two months old, so the Bingley's were traveling at the slowest pace possible to get there.

Soon the grounds would be covered in small children. Jane's daughter, Eliza, was four, the same age as Elizabeth's son William, while Lydia's twins were six months younger. Then, of course, there were Kitty's little crawler, James, and Mary's adopted seven-year-old son, Thomas. Mary had married a widower. Elizabeth's second child, Helena, was just eight months old, but she'd already begun to crawl.

Elizabeth couldn't wait to see her family and tell them her own news. Just as she had been the first sister to marry, now she would be the first among them to give birth to her third child. She had saved the news for her birthday celebration. Not even Darcy knew the secret, and she was excited to see the expression on his face when she waited for dinner to announce it to them all.

Even Fitz and Anne were coming from Rosings, and wonder of wonders, Lady Catherine had agreed to visit too. She'd been to Pemberley about three times since Will had been born, though the two of them were not close. They continued only to tolerate each other, with the visits being to see the children and her niece and nephew rather than any motivation to visit Elizabeth herself.

She could just hear the Lady now, commenting that Elizabeth seemed to be taking after her mother. She had already made just such a remark when she'd first come to see their daughter, stating that she hoped the yearly births would produce at least one more boy among

the litter.

Over time, Elizabeth had come to understand that some of the word choices the woman used were not meant to be the insults that she took them for, but rather just the way she perceived the world, so she forgave her for insinuating that Elizabeth's children were puppies rather than people, and simply moved on.

Darcy's friend, Stanton, had also brought his wife to meet Elizabeth, though the couple was unable to visit for any extended lengths of time due to the trouble with her sister. Thankfully, Stanton's father did not disinherit him, but for the most part, the couple stayed at the little house in Town to help care for Mary. Recently, Helena had also given birth to a son, and word had it that Mary actually was quite good around him.

Just a few hours later, with the adults all assembled at the long table and all the children being nurtured by various servants for the evening, Elizabeth stood up and smiled at them. "Everyone, there is a certain announcement I'd like to make. I'd like you all to know that Darcy and I are now expecting our third child!"

Even as sisters, husbands, cousins, and parents exclaimed excitedly, the door to the room opened and Elizabeth saw that Hoof had escaped the kennels yet again and had come to join the party. She laughed as the dog raced over and stole Georgiana's fork right out of her hand.

"Oh, Hoof!" Georgiana exclaimed as she rose to chase her. "Will you never learn?"

Elizabeth was still laughing as Darcy pulled her into his arms. "I thought we agreed not to keep any secrets, my love."

She giggled contentedly, and all the love in her heart for him surged through her heart. She looked around the room at all the people she cared for and silently thanked the big dog as well. If not for Hoof, none of them would have the happy lives they were living now.

"We did agree to it, sir," she told him. "But then I thought, well, what harm is there in just the one?" **THE END**

**Thank you for reading!**

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